

杉原智則

イラスト●3

烙印の紋章 VIII

竜は獅子を喰らいて転生す

RAKUIN NO MONSHOU

– Emblem of the Branded –

- Volume 8 -

THE DRAGON ATE A LION AND WAS REBORN

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3

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これは、おまえにしか頼めないことだ。
シーク、頼む。この書状をアプターへ。

西方の英雄 **オルバ**

わ、わかった。わかったとも。
どうせ、いますぐ発てというんだろう？
わかったよ、このシークさまが、
すべていいようにしてやる。
きみは、ほくなしじゃあんにもできやしないんだからね。

美貌の剣士 **シーク**



ガーベラ国貴族令嬢
リノア・コチン



ガーベラ国第二王子
ゼノン・アウエル

「サウザンテス卿のこと、
今日ここにお顔を出していただけたこともそうですが、
殿下は、やはりお変わりになりましたわね」
「そう思うか。ふむ、自分ではわからないものだ」
「口さがない者なら、ゼノンさまはエンデとの戦いで
窮地に陥られたため、騎士道精神を失い、
意気地なしになったと非難する可能性もありましょう」



卓越した竜丁
ホウ・ラン

この子は、彼の帰りを待っている。
それまではわたしが守ってあげると約束した。

王族の権利、義務とは、力とは、
果たしてなんなのか。

ガーベラ国第三王女
ビリーナ



大陸中央部



烙印の紋章Ⅷ

竜は獅子を喰らいて転生す

杉原智則

イラスト ● 3

PROLOGUE

Thinking it had heard the cry of a beast in the distance, the figure pulled back with a start.

After taking the time to slowly survey its surroundings, it began walking again.

However, its steps were unsteady. Swaying like a branch in the wind, it limped on, one step at a time.

She was wearing a flight suit for riding in an airship. It was torn all over, but the reason the skin was completely exposed at her arm was because she had ripped the cloth herself. She had wrapped it around her head. There were faint bloodstains through the cloth.

Even her sense of time was vague. She felt like she had been walking almost forever, but also like it had been less than an hour since she started.

But the darkness had certainly increased.

Which means... At least ten hours. A mist seemed to be hanging over her consciousness and she was just barely able to muster that thought in a corner of her head.

It was certain that the fighting had broken out just before dawn. She had tried to stop the war, but her abilities had not been up to the task. In the end, gunfire had been exchanged near the border.

Even so, she had unable to give up. She had flown an airship. To dampen the enemy's spirit, she had gone so far as to pretend to hurl herself at them.

But, as she had been turning around to put some distance between them, a stray shot had hit the ship's stern.

It could be called good luck amidst misfortune that she had not picked up too much altitude because of the need to threaten the enemy. One moment, she had been thrown from the cockpit and into the air, the next, she found that she had rolled to the bottom of a mountain path.

When she recovered consciousness, the cacophony of battle had completely and utterly disappeared. Nothing but quiet mountain scenery spread out all around.

Dragging her aching body, she started to make her way back to the airship. If she followed the path upwards, she should find the ship and in it, a map and a compass.

But, no matter how much she climbed, the reality was neither the shadow nor shape of the airship could be seen. And although there had been a battle, she didn't come across any corpses. By the time she realised that she was moving away from the battlefield, she had already lost all sense of direction.

Her head throbbed with pain. Putting her hand to it, she noticed for the first time that it was bleeding.

Although she tore her clothes into shreds and wound them around her head, it couldn't erase the uneasy feeling of having been thrown, alone, into an unknown land.

When she remained still, a strange feeling welled up from the bottom of her stomach. Her body trembled and she instinctively wanted to scream.

So she pressed forward aimlessly. If she stopped, she would have to recognise that the feeling could only be called fear. By now, the path had started to go downwards. Even though she had decided to continue down when she had been looking at it from above, as she walked along it with unsteady steps, for some reason she found herself walking along an upwards sloping path again.

There were no signs of life.

Even when she strained her ears, all she could hear was the chirping of birds. The echoes of swords and of gunfire didn't reach her at all.

Thinking about it, changing direction back there had been a mistake. In the end, she was just getting more and more lost.

Her surroundings were gradually enveloped in darkness. Noticing that, her fretfulness increased. At night, this was the kind of scenery that was meant to be gazed at from inside, through a window. But now, she was in the middle of it. The light was gone and she had to continue walking alone, in this cold world, without a scrap of warmth.

Wasn't there a light to be seen somewhere?

Wasn't there even a single fire lit by human hands flickering somewhere?

As though trying to escape from the night that was looming closer by the minute, she quickened her steps. But she wasn't used to walking such long distances. Although she had confidence in her physical strength, her joints were heavy and she was already panting raggedly.

She felt overwhelmed.

Was she really this helpless, she wondered. A proud heart, a strong-willed gaze, able to throw out her chest and face any kind of difficulty at any time. That was the kind of person she was supposed to be. And yet, as soon as she took a single step away from human dwellings, and as soon as the people who protected her were all gone, she was in this state.

Her headache kept getting worse.

When she became aware of it, she stopped and leaned against a nearby tree. She had intended to start walking again after she had caught her breath a little, but she slowly started sinking down. Even though there had still been some daylight until a moment ago, in this area of close-growing trees, it was already as dark as night; or perhaps the sun had sunk without her noticing. As though lulled by the darkness, her eyelids involuntarily dropped.

I can't sleep. I can't sleep. I can't go to sleep – she thought, but her body already felt far away. Her legs wouldn't listen to her, exactly as though they belonged to another person; and the unbearable pain in her head was gradually fading into the distance.

In its place, innumerable waves as black as night were creeping into her consciousness. There was no fighting against the exhaustion of both body and mind; finally, her posture collapsed completely, just as her eyelids had done, and she remained unmoving.

Far away, a beast howled again.

The night wind blew as if to spread the darkness in every recess.

Who could say how much time passed.

The rustle of footsteps pushing through the undergrowth approached.

But the figure leaning against the tree didn't stir. She had entirely lost consciousness.

At the same time, at the Dragon God Shrine in Solon, the imperial capital of Mephius – a woman who was known for being a more pious devotee than anyone else in the palace stood, alone and immobile, before the altar. Her eyes were closed and her head bowed as though she were offering up a prayer.

Empress Melissa Mephius.

Her plump red lips stood out in her lovely face which, in spite of her age, was like a young girl's. Those lips seemed to move into the shape of a smile and, there where no one was, they whispered,

"The hunting dogs have been released."

CHAPTER 1

REPARATIONS

PART 1

Even though it was not yet close to morning, the streets of Taúlia were filled with a jumbled crowd of people.

A noisy hubbub filled squares, back alleys, and all around.

Smoke rose from one corner of the town. Buildings had been reduced to rubble and lay scattered around the neighbourhood. Not, however, because of an enemy assault. The one who had ordered cannons to be fired at them was none other than the general in charge of all the troops in Taúlia, Bouwen Tedos.

Naturally, just before that, Bouwen had the populace take shelter. Whether they had wanted to or not, knocks on their doors had roused people from their beds. As they had finished carrying their household goods outside, with the help of the soldiers, the preparations for the guns were being arranged. Before long, the roar of cannons and the impact of the explosions had torn the everyone in the city from their sleep.

"War again?"

As they gathered at a distance around the rising flames, the people looked at each other gloomily.

War was not rare in the west. Battles arose every day in one place or another. But it was clear from their faces that they were pretty well fed up with it. Such was the extent to which the assault by Garda's army, which had plunged the entire region into turmoil, had transformed the mood in the west.

"Is it the remnants of Garda's army?"

"Cherik tried to keep Taúlia in check previously and might have moved its troops. Isn't that it?"

"No," a man who had an acquaintance at Court, and so was well-informed, shook his

head. "You'll be amazed when you hear. They say the opponent is Mephius."

"Nonsense!"

It was proof of how the west had changed that a voice immediately rose to refute him. Compared to in the past, the anti-Mephius feeling within Taúlia had also shifted considerably.

The inhabitants of Taúlia remembered how, just a few months ago, Mephius' Crown Prince Gil had clearly been waving his hand as he rode through their streets alongside their lord, Ax. It had been at that time that the two countries, which had been long-standing enemies, had almost miraculously been bound in friendship. However—

"Prince Gil is no longer with us."

Imperial Prince Gil had been betrayed by a vassal and his young life had been torn to nothing. The people of Taúlia naturally knew this fact. It was surely because that retainer could not gladly accept the peace negotiations with Taúlia.

"They even say that it was the Emperor himself who gave the order."

"But because Prince Gil died..." an elderly man shook his grizzled beard.

"Even so, it's wrong of them to say that there's no need to keep the promise with the west, isn't it!"

"There's no point getting mad at me."

"Whatever the case, it'd be nice if it doesn't drag on too long. The fields outside are going to be wrecked all over again."

When night had almost completely lifted and the morning light shone on the people in whose faces anger and gloom overlapped, soldiers acting as forward messengers came rushing up and shouts erupted all around the town.

"They're returning in triumph, they're returning in triumph."

"A triumphal return!"

In that instant, it felt as though the dark atmosphere that had settled in the town was

completely dispelled with the morning sun.

The gates were thrown open and Taúlia's troops, Bouwen at their head, rode in one after another. There were the orderly echoes of horseshoes, the jaunty figures of the soldiers, and the bold sharpness of the spears held high.

Even those who had been exchanging glances with worried faces until just a moment ago, now wore bright expressions and greeted them with cheers. All else aside, they had won. All else aside, Taúlia had protected their lives, their belongings, and their families.

Bouwen waved his hand in response to the crowd's welcome. Although he was young, he was the commander-in-chief who shouldered the entire responsibility for Taúlia's defence while Ax was away. He had achieved fame by protecting the city, along with Princess Esmena, when Raswan Bazgan had risen in rebellion.

Along with the hero-king Ax, who had defeated Garda, he was the pride of the people of Taúlia. Bouwen had once again demonstrated his rare talent and had protected them from the calamity of the ravages of war. The people could still vividly remember the feeling of victory after Garda's defeat. Now that they were tasting it again, even though they didn't know the details, even though the enemy's name was unclear, they were for a while intoxicated with ecstasy.

But Bouwen's emotions, as he smiled left and right from atop his horse, were anything but carefree. He sensed that, rather than it being over with this, the fight had only just begun. Just as it had been rumoured among part of the population, the identity of the enemy that had attacked Taúlia was the neighbouring country, Mephius. They had also received information that military forces still remained in the border fortress of Apta.

Bouwen had already sent a request for reinforcements throughout the west. But if the number of their troops swelled up because of that, and Mephius still did not give up on its invasion, he was afraid that it might escalate into all-out war.

Garda's rampage and his subjugation had exhausted the west. Did it really have enough strength left to prevail in such a large-scale fight?

And on top of that...

If Ax and Bouwen were heroes, there was one other who had gained renown in the war against Garda. But his figure was not to be seen in the long line following behind.

For a moment, as Bouwen Tedos pondered about that hero, his smile was tinged with gloom.

"Hang in there."

"Your child is going to be born soon right? What's going to happen if its father isn't around!"

On one side, Bouwen's soldiers were marching in a grand parade along the main avenues –

While in Taúlia's back alleys, the soldiers who were too wounded to walk were being transported on carts and stretchers while their friends encouraged them.

There were those who had taken a bullet to the stomach, those who had an arm or a leg cut off, those who had their bones crushed by being trampled by a dragon... there were also those among them who were so badly injured that it would be difficult to find a part of them that was unharmed. One of them, his face covered in streams of his own blackened blood, had died.

And also –

"Orba!"

The swordsman who was being thus called, was in one of the carts. It was undoubtedly Orba, the masked swordsman who had defeated Garda; but now, a number of cracks ran through the mask that was like his symbol and almost half of its left side had been blown away. Nonetheless, the colour of his bare skin could not be seen. It was completely hidden under viscous, flowing blood.

"Orba... Orba... Hang in there. You're not going to fall here, right."

Shique and Gilliam were racing through the back alleys, keeping up on either side with the cart that was carrying him. For a while now, Shique had been repeatedly reaching out towards him, as though to shake him awake.

Several times already Gilliam had stopped him, saying "It's best not to touch him for now," and each time Shique had complied, only to do the same thing again a few seconds later.

Right then, Orba was racked by a violent coughing fit. The foam of blood that had been hardening like a paste around his mouth was shaken off. "Orba!" Shique kept calling his name.

There was no answer. Even though he was breathing, he had all but lost consciousness. Watching as his chest heaved violently but at times weakly, Shique held his own breath.

The previous evening, the few remaining forces left within the city walls of Taúlia had ambushed the Mephian army which had suddenly crossed the border. As a matter of course, Orba's mercenary unit had been added to them. Moreover, on Bouwen's decision, they had been entrusted with a pivotal strategic position.

Orba's unit had accomplished their mission magnificently. After ambushing the enemy's detached force in a surprise attack and annihilating them, they had ridden to their opponents' main army, which was hot on the heels of Bouwen's "fleeing" forces, and charged at their flank.

It happened after they had won the hard-fought battle and just as it seemed that Mephius' army had finally been driven back.

Orba had been shot at by an enemy soldier who was concealed among the corpses. The bullet had essentially brushed against his mask and his head had not taken a direct hit, but the impact had been fierce and Orba had been knocked unconscious from his horse.

The left side of his mask had been blown away. But in the situation, the remaining half was the greater problem. The countless cracks running through the mask were biting into his forehead and were, even now, causing his blood to flow continuously.

"Shit," Gilliam groaned as he ran alongside the cart. "He was as fit as a fiddle even when he defeated Garda and now you're saying he's going to be killed by Mephians like us?"

"He isn't going to die!" Shique screamed. Compared to his usual self, his face was like another person's. "He, at a point like this... He won't die. There's so much more he..."

"Ah-ha, yeah. Right. That's right. We're gladiators who lived through hell. We've given the slip to death time and time again. Especially this guy. If it comes calling, he'll just pretend to be out or something."

The wounded were carried to the barracks' courtyard. The commanders or those who were related to Taúlian aristocrats were carried to exclusive medical facilities, but soldiers other than them were sent to simple tents set up in the courtyard. Dark-skinned doctors rushed about, the white robes that indicated their status becoming dyed in blood.

Soldiers who couldn't fit in the tents were stretched out on mats in the courtyard.

"This way."

Several soldiers rushed up to where Orba had been lifted from the cart and were about to place him on a stretcher. They had apparently received orders to, as consideration towards the hero, make an exception and carry him to the medical room. However –

"Wait," Shique blocked them sharply. "Let him rest a bit here. He's completely worn out. Orba, do you need water?"

He offered his own water canteen to Orba, who was laid out on the ground. As Orba's consciousness seemed to still be hazy, there was no reaction. Shique dripped a little water onto his dry lips.

"Oi, it's better to hurry."

Gilliam urged from behind him, but for some reason, Shique didn't want to get up. He grasped Orba's hand as though trying to offer him even just a little of his own warmth. While on the one hand he was worrying about his health like a mother would, a different concern was also occupying Shique's mind.

It will be absolutely necessary to take off the mask for treatment.

And naturally, that meant that Orba's face would be exposed for all to see.

Just as in the townspeople's earlier recollections, many of Taúlia's inhabitants had seen Gil Mephius' face.

He didn't know how many of them there were who would remember it after only

having seen it once, and then only for a few seconds. What would happen if even only one person had scrupulously memorised Orba's undisguised face?

Dammit.

Behind him, Gilliam once again asked him what he was doing. And of course, Shique also wanted to hurry. He wanted to have him be treated as soon as possible.

If it comes down to it, even if it's a ridiculous explanation, I'll just have to say that it's a case of different people looking a lot alike.

Because he resembled the crown prince and that caused all sorts of disasters, in the end, he had put on a mask and fled from Mephius... There was no alternative.

Just as Shique was finally about to stand up, an unexpected person stepped into the courtyard filled with the wounded.

T-This is - The instant he saw who it was, Shique gulped and rose to stand between that person and Orba. "She" was one of the people who knew Gil's real face well.

"P-Princess. How is this possible. Why is the princess in a place like..."

"You said your name was Shique, did you not?"

It was Esmena Bazgan.

Lord Ax Bazgan's daughter, Esmena, had her hands clasped before her waist and her demeanour was utterly calm; yet even so her eyes blazed with a determined light.

The soldiers also noticed her and quickly stood to attention. Even among the injured, there were those who tried to force themselves to rise and bow to her. Esmena held up a hand to stop them.

"Everyone, please be at ease," she said in her gentle voice. "You are the braves who protected Taúlia. Please take care now to rest well."

Although she spoke cheerfully, Esmena's face was pale. There were soldiers who had lost an eye. There were half-naked soldiers who had taken bullets and whose sinews were swollen and distorted. There were soldiers whose fingers or ears had been sliced off. For Esmena, who was seeing something like this for the first time, it was like a

scene from Hell itself.

For a Court-bred lady, it would not have been surprising if she had fainted at a single glance, but –

“Shique,” she walked towards the Mephian mercenary, “I heard that Orba is here.”

“Eh?”

“I heard that the hero was carried here. Where is he now...”

As he hadn't thought that Taúlia's princess would personally come to see Orba, Shique was for a moment flabbergasted.

During the opening that created, Esmena caught sight of Orba from over Shique's shoulder. She to, for a moment, was left speechless. When Shique noticed, he shifted his position to obstruct her line of sight, but –

"Somebody. Is there anybody here?" Esmena called out in an unexpectedly loud voice. The soldiers who had been about to carry Orba away rushed up. "How long do you intend to leave this gentleman to sleep on the ground? Hurry and take him inside."

"R-Right away. On General Bouwen's orders, we were about to carry Captain Orba away."

"This is the great hero who saved the west. In a manner of speaking, his concerns are the country's concerns. Please move him to the detached wing of the castle. I will call one of the Court physicians."

"P-Princess."

Unusually for Shique, he was so stunned that he couldn't say anything. While on one hand he felt that this was the safest for Orba's health, on the other it would be dangerous letting the princess, who knew Gil's face so well, get any closer to him.

"We should not expose his face to too many people either," Esmena said decisively. Shique was now taken aback for a different reason. "Taúlia is not so ungrateful as to ignore the hero's wishes and expose what he has hidden. Now, Shique. Please lend your help."

As she said that, she lowered an eyelid slightly. In a way, that surprised Shique more than anything.

Don't tell me – the thought flashed through his brain – *don't tell me that the princess knows about Orba and Gil?*

Esmena had been captured by Garda, and the one to save her had been none other than Orba. Probably in order to thank him, she had invited Orba to her chambers after returning to Taúlia. What had passed between them at that time?

Shique's mind was in turmoil over a number of things; but at any rate, it was certain that Orba's face could not be exposed to any great number of people.

He accompanied those carrying Orba on the stretcher. Gilliam watched at a distance as their figures left the rear courtyard and disappeared into a corridor that led to the castle.

The mercenaries from the same unit belatedly arrived. When they heard that their captain was apparently going to receive treatment at the Court, for a while, they looked relieved. But –

"The victory celebration... I don't really feel like it," said Talcott.

"No, I'm going to be drinking the liquor we're offered," Gilliam shook his beard as he spoke. "I know myself: I can't sit around quietly worrying about a friend in that state."

"There's that too."

Talcott energetically swung his left arm. He seemed to have taken a blow from an axe to his armguard and was still feeling numb.

"Mephius is going to come back, isn't it?"

"Probably."

"But above all, just when it looks like we could carry on with the mercenary business, the opponent is Mephius of all things. It means that, even apart from the injury, things are going to get bad for the captain."

Although he was young, Talcott had grown worldly-wise from switching between all

sorts, from a pirate to a nomad to a mercenary. His words half sounded like a prediction, and even Gilliam couldn't help but feel a touch of anxiety.

Arriving in an annex of the castle, Esmena left the room for a moment and had her ladies' maids call a doctor she was acquainted with. She had known him for a long time and he was the previous Grand Steward of the Court Physicians. He was already advanced in age but his skill at surgery was certain. His name was Faisal.

Naturally Esmena chose him because of the trust she had in his character and talent, but there was one other important reason. Previously, when Gil Mephius had come to Taúlia as a goodwill envoy, Faisal himself had been sick and in bed. Esmena remembered it because after the reception banquet for Gil was over, she had personally paid him a get-well visit. In other words, Faisal did not know Gil's face.

Although it was early in the morning, Faisal had readily agreed to Esmena's request.

"Oh, that tiny little princess appointed me herself?"

It had to be said that Esmena had been raised in an overprotective way. So from when she was much younger, whenever she had a cold or whenever she had fallen outside, Ax would summon Faisal. Whether it was the dead of night, whether he was in middle of examining other patients, at any and all times.

He was a doctor who was already in his sixties. But he was still sprightly. He was also a long-time associate of Ravan Dol's, whose injuries he was currently treating.

Led by a soldier, he entered the room where Orba had been laid.

And witnessed a strange scene.

A man who looked like a woman was almost entirely draped over the patient who was lying flat. He appeared to be taking advantage of the confusion to strip the wounded man of all of his possessions.

"What are you doing!" Faisal shouted but the other didn't act as though he were surprised. His face glistening with sweat, he seemed to be winding fresh bandages around the injured person's upper body.

"I will take over from here. Amateurs can draw back." At first glance, Faisal had a gentle appearance but when it came to medical matters he was as overpowering as a general.

"Don't come closer!" The man who looked like a woman – Shique, naturally – yelled back.

He was wondering whether the man had lost his sanity but the eyes that stared back at him held an unexpectedly intellectual light and Faisal halted his steps with an air of surprise.

Shique finished wrapping the bandages then quietly laid Orba down. Looking at him, the bandage was completely coiled around him from his chest to his abdomen.

Shique jumped off the bed and went towards Faisal. "It's something like a Mephian charm," he explained in a completely different tone. "Someone who is close to the injured person envelops them in sincerity and wraps a bandage around them. Ah, it doesn't have to be where they were actually wounded. Until after he wakes up, please don't take it off without permission. Or you will lose your life to a curse."

At that moment, his expression was one of restrained fury. Rather than a "curse", this man himself might turn his blade against him with murderous intent if he broke his word.

Faisal gazed for a while at that expression of Shique's.

"I get it," he scratched his head and agreed. "I hate a wife's nagging about as much as I do curses and sorcery."

Shique bowed as though to signal that he entrusted the rest to him and left the room. The reason for the bandages was to hide the slave mark branded into Orba's back. The people in Taúlia knew that Orba was a former sword slave, but who knew what would happen from here on. He was preparing for a situation in which it became known that Orba was Gil Mephius.

Shique trusted that he had done everything he could. He didn't believe in any god worshipped in this world, so he didn't pray. From here on, he could only bet on Orba's own luck and vitality.

As he leaned against the wall. He felt like he could hear his body, which had been overexerted since the previous evening, screaming.

Is he going to be killed by Mephians like us?

The words Gilliam had muttered earlier floated across his mind.

Mephians? Right, we're also Mephians, huh?

Gilliam probably hadn't previously had any particular awareness that he was a Mephian. But after coming to the west, he couldn't help but become conscious of the difference in nationality. The same went for Shique.

Orba... Is also Mephian. There's no denying it.

The sun was about to rise. As he walked along the corridor that ran from the castle annex to the courtyard, a warm wind blew from the side.

He gazed up at the sky that was turning blue. There, on the other side of a border that he couldn't see, was Mephius. Mephius, which was the current enemy and also his native country.

PART 2

In that very Mephius, at Apta, its westernmost tip, a large crowd was milling about despite the early hour. Just like the people of Taúlia, their expressions were filled with anxiety and trepidation. The roar of artillery fire that had reverberated around dawn had been more than enough to disturb their quiet sleep.

It was after the sun had fully risen that the troops led by Nabarl returned.

Unlike in Taúlia, this was not a "triumphant return". The armour of the soldiers on horseback seemed heavy. The figures of the wounded were conspicuous. No matter how you looked at it, they were a bedraggled, broken-down group from a defeated army.

Unerasable exhaustion and humiliation also clung to the face of Nabarl Metti, who rode first; but as the commander-in-chief, he struck as proud a pose as he could. However, that was only after he had passed through the gate.

He had been riding his horse hard until they had crossed the River Yunos, focussed on nothing but escaping. Pashir stuck close to him from behind, a behaviour he was forced to adopt to protect Nabarl's back, and which only served to expose the general's shameful behaviour all the more.

Nabarl was a commander who took pride in his many military achievements. Before leaving for the front, he was confident that this battle could not be lost. They had gotten information that very few troops had been left in Taúlia; the tactic that he had chosen was that once he had himself lured those remaining forces to the border, a detached force would attack Taúlia by surprise.

Even if by some chance his perception was wrong and it took a little more time, defeat was unthinkable.

In effect, Nabarl believed he had a ninety percent chance of victory on the battlefield, then suddenly the situation had been reversed. The ones caught in a pincer movement were not Taúlia but instead the main body of Nabarl's troops. Darren's detached force had probably been annihilated. César, who was acting as vice-commander of Nabarl's troops, was also nowhere to be seen.

It was an overwhelming defeat.

In these few hours, Nabarl Metti's plump cheeks, which usually jiggled when he was on horseback, seemed to have completely sunk in. But, even so, as he went through the streets of Apta, his face was expressionless to the last. His attitude as he jumped off his horse was as though he had only gone for a long ride or something routine like that. Then, after handing the bridle to the attendants and without paying any attention to the voices that hailed him, he returned with long strides to the highest room in Apta's castle - the room that Prince Gil had once stayed in.

As soon as he shut the door, Nabarl went wild. He knocked down the vase displayed by the entrance, drew out his sword, sliced through the table and chairs, and then kicked away the fragments with all his strength. By the time Rogue and Odyne had hurried over, having learned of Nabarl's return, there wasn't even a chair left to offer them.

When he was informed of the two generals' visit, Nabarl very much considered yelling; but by then he had somewhat regained his composure and, breathing hard, he ordered the chamberlains to quickly clean the room. A long table was brought out of a spare room and a map of Apta's surroundings was spread out on top, exactly as though he had been closely examining strategies.

Receiving Nabarl's permission, Rogue Saian – general of the Dawnlight Wings Division – and Odyne Lorgo – general of the Silver Axe Division – entered the room.

They had come to Apta having been ordered to conquer Taúlia. However, because Nabarl had gotten worked up about "doing it with my soldiers alone," they had remained in Apta to hold the defensive line. Although neither of the two generals was enthusiastic about the conquest of Taúlia, they still couldn't hide their surprised expressions that Nabarl had returned after being routed.

"Does Taúlia have that great a number of soldiers?"

"About double ours. Ah... no, more than expected but not... not that much..."

Nabarl articulated falteringly. He was ashamed at having been defeated by a small armed force. But if he said that the number of soldiers had exceeded his expectations it would also make his own reading of the situation, on which he had based his strategy, seem shallow. To top it off, before taking the field, Nabarl had declared with great dignity that this strategy had been "elaborated together with His Imperial Majesty."

Rogue Saian suddenly felt pity for the man.

"War is a living creature. No matter how carefully a strategy is laid, the situation can change at a drop of a hat. Besides which, there's the matter of luck. It seems that this time fortune was on Taúlia's side."

He spoke sympathetically but his manner had the opposite effect and only stoked the flames of Nabarl's anger.

"No!" Nabarl suddenly raised his voice and pounded his fleshy fist against the table. "I am no god and I could accept it if it were said to be fate, but this isn't the kind of thing which can be settled with a few words about luck. This was vile treachery!"

"Treachery?"

"Yes, Garbera's princess, Vileena Owell. That accursed woman betrayed us to Taúlia."

"Impossible!" Both generals cried out together. Because the name which had been brought up was so unexpected, they suspected that the shock of defeat might perhaps have caused the man in front of them to lose his sanity.

They were more than half right.

Although it was true that the princess had betrayed secret information, when he had heard about it, Nabarl had not believed that it would overturn the war situation. Rather, he had judged it to be convenient, since on top of undoubtedly drawing the enemy to the border, the information brought by Vileena would rile up the enemy.

But Nabarl craved a good excuse to be able to recover from the shock and heavy blow of losing the battle. Although he had often stood at the front lines, he was not use to the position of commander-in-chief and was not able to bear the entire burden of responsibility.

Vileena giving up secret information was a perfect detail for Nabarl to grasp onto.

That damn viper. She was definitely sent from Garbera to sink her poisonous fangs into Mephius.

While he was telling Rogue and Odyne about the scene in which she had put on airs like some kind of hero and had haughtily ordered him to "pull up camp," Nabarl even

started believing in his own heart that such was undoubtedly the truth.

Odyne called one of his men, whom he had left on standby outside the door, and had him check whether the princess was currently in the castle. The answer was immediate. Since the previous evening, the princess' lady's maid had been kicking up a ruckus as the princess had not returned.

"Why did you not alert me at once?"

"B-Because after all, the war was about to start... My deepest apologies."

Odyne clicked his tongue. He exchanged glances with the old general Rogue next to him. Each seemed to expect to see their own emotions in the other's expression. Nor was that expectation misplaced.

The princess has taken action.

It wasn't that either Rogue or Odyne had a particularly deep connection with Princess Vileena but neither did they believe, as Nabarl did, that she was "just an empty-headed little girl". Of course she must have known what the repercussions of her actions would be – for Mephius, for the west, and also for her home country of Garbera.

"There's no point in talking about the Princess' betrayal any more this." Nabarl said, although it was he himself who had spoken about it interminably, and then immediately started to reorganise the troops as he was determined to get a second shot in at Taúlia. "It's true that the enemy ambushed us, but even with that, Taúlia is practically in our grasp. If anything, it's their side that barely made it out alive. They will be full of themselves from having driven us back, so we will attack without delay. This time, I will be asking the two of you for your assistance as well."

Staring into the eyes of the two generals, he said that almost half threateningly.

The two of them however firmly objected. Nabarl had not yet cooled down from the excitement of war. If they let themselves engage with the enemy again, there was a high chance that they would suffer another blow.

"Have you lost your nerve?" Nabarl glared angrily at them.

"The situation has changed from when you received His Majesty's orders. Before anything else, send a messenger to Solon. Or are you saying that His Majesty's orders

were to wage a war of extermination no matter how many times we are driven back?" coaxed Rogue.

Nabarl was just as terrified of being blamed by the emperor for his failure as he was of altering the emperor's orders. His mental state before he had left for battle was that of one who didn't fear even the gods, but once his support was removed, that confidence turned flimsy.

He reluctantly agreed. He may have lost some of his composure but he certainly wouldn't think to attack Taúlia again with only his own partially annihilated troops.

A messenger was sent to Solon and, while they waited for a reply, this time he asked Rogue and Odyne for their cooperation in strengthening Apta's defence line. For the moment, Taúlia was not making any move. Neither an attack nor a messenger seemed to be coming their way, and all they had was information that reinforcements were gathering rapidly.

Nabarl's impatience increased day by day.

Rogue Saian similarly received a detailed report from a soldier on look-out duty. There were movements that seemed to indicate that the west was banding together against Mephius. If that was the case, then as soon as either one crossed the border, it might turn into a large-scale war. Even Emperor Guhl Mephius should not easily decide to make a move but –

The emperor as he is now - Might try to make the west submit by force.

When he had decided to seize Taúlia, Guhl Mephius had not had any just cause to do so. He had heard from Nabarl that it was because Crown Prince Gil had been assassinated by Taúlian underlings; but even the so-called emperor faction - to which he suspected Nabarl belonged - were unlikely to believe that was the truth.

If His Majesty gives the order to charge yet again... Doubts about what he should do swirled within Rogue's chest.

If his orders were to fight grandly against a detested enemy and die, even now Rogue

would not shake his head and refuse. As long as he could write a single letter to his family, after that, he would have no regrets. Clad in the armour that had been passed down from generation to generation by his ancestors, he would gladly face his final battlefield with sword in hand.

But Rogue had no grudge against the west. Besides, Prince Gil had chosen friendship with that land. Even if it was his lord's command, would he be able to drive his men into a fight devoid of any righteousness, and order them to die?

Even at my age, doubts don't go away.

Not a day went by that there wasn't a crease in Rogue's forehead, which didn't disappear even during full-day training sessions.



From what he had heard, the feelings of Apta's inhabitants were split in two. Only in this land, which had shared a connection with the Prince, were there voices yelling furiously that they needed to destroy Taúlia and avenge the Prince, and also voices that calmly rebuked them, saying that there must be some mistake since not so long ago a messenger of friendship had come directly from Taúlia.

If the people of Taúlia remembered Prince Gil, the people of Apta remembered seeing Princess Esmena.

Above all else, there was the practical issue that if war broke out again, Apta might become a battlefield. The fortress had been bombed by Prince Gil himself in order to repel an all-out attack and, with its full reconstruction finally almost in sight, the people were deeply worried.

As these voices reached his ears, Rogue's hesitations grew increasingly strong.

He was, however, a born warrior. Separate from his personal convictions or from his concern for the people's mood, there was a part of him that was carefully examining the war. If an exchange of hostilities could not be avoided, how should they fight?

Rogue had already heard the details of the battle from Pashir, a soldier who had taken part in it alongside Nabarl. He had formerly been an Imperial Guard but, because Nabarl wanted the skill of the runner-up in the gladiatorial tournament, or perhaps to make his unit look better, he had forcefully incorporated him into his troops.

According to him, it wasn't through lack of tactics that Nabarl had failed to break through to the enemy's centre. He had attempted a surprise attack by boldly advancing his soldiers through the Belgana Summits, which could be called a natural stronghold - a daring method that Rogue's age would not have allowed him to consider. Nabarl had no doubt meticulously investigated the terrain before marching. It was not a common plan and it had been carefully prepared.

Yet in spite of that, Taúlia had pushed back Nabarl's troops with only a small army.

Even if they had the geographical advantage and the information from Garbera's princess, I don't think that's the entire reason.

The Princess. Right, the Princess, huh...?

No matter how much he knew that he should be focusing on the war, the doubts within

the old general's chest wouldn't die down. Every time he thought about the Garberan princess' actions and worried about her whereabouts, Rogue had the impression that his cheeks were tensing involuntarily.

Elsewhere.

Although he had suffered a defeat, the commander-in-chief at Apta was still Nabarl Metti. Neither Rogue nor Odyne could move a single soldier without his permission. The two of them had pestered him into organising a unit separate from the defence formation.

A search party for the princess.

Since the battle with Taúlia, her whereabouts were unknown.

Hmph – Nabarl snorted in disinterest.

It seemed that Rogue and Odyne still did not believe that the princess had acted as she had, but Nabarl had seen her head towards Taúlia with his own eyes and had heard the information she held with his own ears. He had also personally witnessed her creating a disturbance on the battlefield in an airship.

"She's missing? She must have gone back to Taúlia. Around about now, she's probably making a show of being the heroine from some old tale and fanning the Taúlian's morale by spreading slander about Mephius."

Nabarl had been completely uninterested in looking for her, but then he received an unexpected visitor.

He was said to be a messenger from Solon. Nabarl had gone pale, wondering what kind of reprimand he would receive from the Emperor. But thinking about it carefully, it was too early for it to be a response to the news of his defeat.

Moreover, the visitor's appearance was abnormal. Maybe he was a follower of Badyne as he had a cloth wound around his head that made it difficult to distinguish his features. At any rate, he wasn't someone that one would immediately associate with

Guhl Mephius, who was said to want to make the Dragon Gods faith the state religion, but what he held out was unmistakably a letter bearing the emperor of Mephius' signature.

Nabarl was cornered into a state of utter nervousness, but the visitor had a surprising purpose.

"Garbera's princess?"

"Precisely," the man spoke in a rusty voice and it was hard to tell whether he was young or not. "His Majesty allowed her to go to the Nedain area, but she unexpectedly and without permission took one of our country's air carriers and proceeded towards Apta. Even for a guest, her willfulness goes too far. The Princess will not be allowed any further freedom and it is my duty to escort her back to Solon."

"B-But the Princess is..."

"I know. And so, please lend me some soldiers. We will go and search for her."

The man who had introduced himself as Kiril did not falter as he answered. The Princess had betrayed secret information to an enemy country and, on top of that, she had gone missing in enemy territory - although this situation should have been completely impossible to predict, his attitude was as calm as could be.

"Y-You will?"

"It is more convenient if I am the one doing the searching."

Kiril's fingers parted the cloth that hung on either side of his face. Nabarl almost gasped rudely, as what came into his sight was the face of a Zerdian. He felt as though he had been tricked by a shape-shifting fox, but thinking about it, the elders with whom the Emperor had recently been growing closer were all, without exception, Zerdians.

He appeared to have brought about thirty other Zerdians with him. One would have thought that would be more than enough for a search party but as he pointed out –

"We will search along the border. So there is a chance that we will be attacked by the enemy."

For the moment, Nabarl was rendered speechless.

Even having seen Kiril's face, he was unable to say from his features whether he was young or old. The space between his eyes was plump but his cheeks were so hollow that they seemed to have been scrapped off with a knife. Although he wasn't particularly tall, his arms that were stretched out on the desk were surprisingly long.

Nabarl felt that the conversation was strange, but in the end, he had twenty or so soldiers join Kiril. It was a small price to pay if it meant that Rogue and Odyne would stop pestering him.

But I don't understand...

After hearing that they had immediately left Apta, Nabarl closely studied the letter that Kiril had handed over. In it was Empress Melissa's name. It appeared that she had negotiated directly with the elders to have such a large number of people dispatched.

I wouldn't have thought that the Empress minded the Garberan girl that much. Hmph, well, it doesn't matter however it goes.

If the princess' misconduct came to light, Nabarl's wound at having lost the battle would heal somewhat and his reputation would also recover. And above all else, if he could skilfully offer this argument against Garbera during the discussions about them, the emperor would no doubt remember him more favourably.

Such were Nabarl's thoughts; but even after the search party had left, his impatience didn't fade in the slightest. There was a reason for that.

The issue with the princess isn't enough.

Simply put, he sensed that more was needed in order to cover up his own failure.

From being someone who employed mercenaries, Nabarl had achieved the amazing success of being chosen to be one of the twelve generals. But that was all simply because the emperor had willed it. In other words, he was terrified that this time, on no more than a single whim, his position would plummet lower than the ground. He felt as though he had only risen halfway to the sky and now felt a strong desire to find even one more argument to escape responsibility.

"How about the Imperial Guards?"

The one who sensed Nabarl's worries and whispered that to him was one of his long-time retainers, named Gareth. He had been like a younger brother to Darren, the vice-captain who had died in battle in the Belgana Summits.

"What? The Imperial Guards?"

"Those former slaves that the prince specially selected. There are suspicions that they know the truth about the prince's death and pinned the crime on General Oubary Bilan."

For a moment, Nabarl was surprised at the vehemence of Gareth's tone but of course, as far as Emperor Guhl was concerned, the testimony of the Imperial Guards was a hindrance to his claim that the prince had been killed by the west. Because of that, he had ordered Nabarl to restrict their freedom for the time being.

"It looks like they also had a connection to the princess. Isn't it possible that even though they stayed in Mephius, they were feeding advance information to Taúlia?"

"That might well be right..." Nabarl nodded solemnly. In this sort of situation, so to speak, Gareth had the same role as Colyne Isphan did towards Emperor Guhl. Shrewdly reading the emotions of those above him, he drew near them and convincingly spoke out those thoughts on their behalf. "If not for that, such a complete defeat would have been impossible."

"Indeed. And if information is still being leaked, it will start to affect morale. Some of the Guards will have to be made to tell the truth after they have been delivered to his Majesty, but he won't care if we execute a few of them as an example."

"Hmm," Nabarl crossed his brawny arms. Although nights in Apta were cooler than in Solon, the middle of the day was hot. Sweat trickled from his forehead and ran down his plump cheeks.

As Gareth said, executing the former Imperial Guards as traitors would not be a bad move. Just like him, his men had taken a blow from their defeat and if they could attribute their powerlessness to someone else, they should be able to recover their damaged morale. Half of Nabarl's unit were from other mercenary units, but half of them were companions that he had shared meals with from the same pot since the time when he himself had been a mercenary captain. Now that he had become one of the twelve generals, he felt that he wanted to let them see some luck.

That being the case, he needed to have them recover their spirits. From here on and, no matter what reinforcements came rushing from Solon, it absolutely had to be Nabarl Metti's troops which defeated Taúlia.

That said...

The timing was a little off for an execution. It had already been seven days since their defeat. He needed some kind of an excuse. After a moment, Nabarl uncrossed his arms.

"If I remember right, there's a woman among the Imperial Guards."

"Huh? Ah, err... the one who's said to be in charge of taking care of the dragons."

"Yeah. That woman... She's definitely from the west, huh."

The gleam of impatience had faded somewhat from Nabarl's eyes and in its place the light of cruelty glittered.

Approximately twenty former Imperial Guards were being confined in a large chamber beneath the barracks. Gowen and Hou Ran as well as the commander of the airship unit, Neil Thompson, Miguel Tes – who had fought against Orba during the gladiatorial tournament, and Krau – whom the prince had put in charge of steering ships were all to be seen. Pashir, who had gone into battle alongside Nabarl in the fight against Taúlia, had also been brought there.

He had never been a talkative man, but since coming back he had hardly opened his mouth. Irritated at being locked up, Miguel had wanted to hear his war stories but had received a cold shoulder and it had almost turned into a huge fight.

The one who warned them off brawling was Gowen, but as the time passed without anything happening, his eyes would occasionally meet Pashir's. Since it seemed that those eyes were trying to catch his attention, Gowen was about to draw nearer to him when he abruptly shifted his gaze.

It was unlike that man, whose mind and body were both like steel, to wear such a hesitant expression.

He's not thinking of escaping, is he?

But Gowen was no exception either and, in this situation in which he had no way of knowing what was going to happen next, his irritation was growing.

Since the emperor had declared that Prince Gil's assassination had been carried out by Taúlia's agents, he had some idea of how t were going to be dealt with. Maybe it was time to give up on Mephius and seriously work out a plan of escape.

It was then that soldiers under Nabarl's command appeared in the chamber. Wondering if the time for their execution had arrived, he was about to take up a stance at the ready, but they called out for Hou Ran.

"What do you want with her?" Asked Gowen, Ran's foster father.

"The dragons won't settle down," a soldier explained in a rude tone. "When we asked the other dragon handlers, they said that they only listen to this woman's orders. So we're letting you out for a bit. But only to look after the dragons, you're not being allowed any freedom."

Ran didn't interrupt. She was by nature a girl who spent most of her waking hours with dragons. She wasn't likely to object.

Ran – Gowen glanced at her significantly to send her a warning – don't get any strange thoughts. Go with them quietly for now.

Although she was a girl whose expression didn't change much, Gowen had learnt to understand what she was thinking. They had heard the news that Princess Vileena had gone missing after they had been imprisoned, and Ran's attitude had shown that she was worried.

Smiling faintly, Ran patted Gowen on the shoulder as though to say *I know* and was led out of the chamber by the soldiers.

A few minutes later, and under the soldiers' supervision, Ran had started tending to the dragons. These included not only the dragons from Apta but also the ones that General Saian had sent by ship from Nedain. In other words, they were her old "acquaintances."

The soldiers couldn't hide their surprise when she leaped unaided into the cage,

touched the dragons' scales, and guided them while straddling them directly.

But that was only at first.

"You seem to be really used to handling dragons. Do you tame men as well?"

"I hear you also took care of sword slaves."

"Won't you look after us too? We can be as rough as any dragon."

They each raised their voices obscenely.

Ran however ignored them - or rather, she continued working as though their words hadn't even reached her ears. Her expression grew lively.

Eventually the soldiers got tired of it and stopped talking, but their surveillance still continued. Their words had run out but in exchange, the light of naked lust was in their eyes as they continued staring at Hou Ran's body.

PART 3

Solon, the imperial capital of the empire of Mephius.

After finishing up a number of scheduled matters during the morning audience, Emperor Guhl Mephius, defended by a forest of spears brandished by the red-clad Imperial Guardsmen, travelled through the streets in a magnificent carriage and arrived at the temple of the Dragon God's faith.

In a room deep inside the elders were waiting.

It was a plain and empty room except for the long crystal table in its centre. Normally, "crystal" did not refer to the crystal found on Earth, the mother planet, but to a mineral particular to this planet which simply resembled crystal in appearance and in hardness. Whether true or not, it was said however that all of the furniture in the temple was made from actual crystal, from the original planet, which had been loaded onto the migrant spaceship.

The flames, which had been lit in every corner of the chamber, as well as the distorted faces of each of the elders, appeared reflected on the table's surface.

There was no seat of honour. There was no such thing as differences in status between the emperor and the elders who dwelt in the temple. Thus the elders did not rise to greet the emperor when he entered the room, nor did any of them offer drawn-out salutations. And yet, Guhl Mephius' tone was decidedly rude.

"This is the first time that your judgement has erred. Wasn't Taúlia supposed to effortlessly fall into my hands within a few days? I hear that soldiers are now gathering there from all over the west. Forget a few days, this could take six months or even a full year; and cost many Mephian lives."

The elders looked at each other. Although they were all older than Guhl by some ten or twenty years, no one had any words to offer as an answer. They seemed to be avoiding his eyes. Guhl smiled with a feeling of gloomy satisfaction.

"Perhaps I too was a little rash. I trusted too much that your words were infallible. We may now need to take the time to revise the plan."

"Do wait, Your Imperial Majesty," among the elders, there was only one who met his

gaze. "Our judgement does not come from certain knowledge of the future. It is merely a matter of possibilities. The innumerable people who live and breathe in this world each have before them a thousand, ten thousand paths that they can take. Our judgement consists of narrowing them down to those that are contained within a single person's field of vision. Just as we have said repeatedly, it is people who set chance in motion and chance which sets people in motion."

Among the elders, he was comparatively young. His face however was all but expressionless. It was not the lack of expression found on a man of religion who had achieved a certain philosophical state of mind, but rather the empty expression of one who had left emotions behind in his mother's womb at birth.

This time, it was the emperor who had nothing to say. After a moment -

"Religion is convenient. There is no one as good as you all to confuse and misdirect people," he said, almost like a soliloquy.

Guhl Mephius was not originally a person who attached much importance to the country's ancient customs. But he had transformed into a statesman who was attempting to revive the old, ancient beliefs of the Dragon God's' faith and who respected old-fashioned traditions.

It was about three years earlier that he had received the impetus to cultivate his relationship with the elders.

At the time, Mephius was right in the middle of the war with Garbera. Moreover, neither of the two could see a way out of it and it showed every sign of dragging on.

Two years before that, Guhl had lost Empress Lana to illness. During the long, drawn-out war, most of the officers and men who had supported him since the old days had lost their lives. Within the country, people had begun whispering that Guhl was losing heart; partly because of that, as well as to lift people's spirits - including his own, in the mausoleum beneath the black tower that rose in the centre of Solon, Guhl had for the first time performed an "oracle.

With a sword so new it appeared to still give off sparks from the flames that it had surely only just been lifted out of, Guhl cut off the head of the most beautiful woman amongst the slaves. As blood, rather than sparks, dripped from it and trickled down onto the stone floor, he proclaimed that -

"Until the head of the Garberan king is presented before me, I will never sheathe my sword."

The "oracle" was a spoken oath exchanged between the emperor, a descendant of the Dragon God, and the divine spirits of his ancestors.

In the same period, the emperor had strengthened the authority of the Imperial House by unilaterally seizing power from the council. From the view of the nobles, he had acted largely on advice from the many elders who had supervised during the "oracle" ceremony.

From that time forward, the relationship between Guhl and the elders grew stronger. A year ago, around the time when he had exchanged wedding vows with Melissa, the oath itself had been broken by choosing peace with Garbera; but his trust in the elders had only grown greater and eventually reached the point where he had such a large temple built in Solon.

"Emperor Guhl. You believed that our power was essential for accomplishing your long-cherished ambition," the elder directly opposite Guhl spoke dispassionately. "Your longstanding desire is to break out of the relationship between the three countries and to claim supremacy over the centre of the continent. If that comes true, your name will go down in history as that of a strong emperor. For now, the bogged-down war with Garbera has been declared over and the situation is currently falling back into a stalemate. But as you know, each country harbours embers that smoulder strongly. With a single mistake, those embers will engulf Mephius in the raging inferno. On the other hand, by accomplishing a series of small victories one after another, Mephius will then obtain a territory befitting an empire and both your sovereignty as well as the teachings of the Dragon Gods will spread throughout the continent."

The emperor stared fixedly at the elder from under heavy-looking eyelids. They were not the eyes of one gazing at an intimate friend or a deeply trusted vassal; nor were they the eyes of one looking at an enemy. The emperor of Mephius' almost vacant expression clung to him like a mask.

"Be 'strong' Guhl Mephius," the swarthy-skinned elder said in a voice like wind crossing a valley. "For the day of your ideal to come, you cannot forget what you feel. Once you lose sight of that, you will be nothing more than an ordinary old man. So many humans become that way that it is tedious to count them. You need to be

"strong". Certainly, this time things did not go as we had judged they would, but there is no need to become flustered and impatient. As long as we are here, the flow and trend of time will always be in your favour. Before long, you will definitely obtain the power to seize the west and to swallow up Garbera and Ende..."

After Guhl had left, among the elders sitting in the rows of crystal seats, one suddenly almost fell from his chair. It was the elder who had admonished him.

With exclamations and a speed unfitting of their age, the other elders rushed to his side displaying a confusion at odds with their usual aloof and detached behaviour. As though finding them troublesome, the elder shook off the hands stretched out towards him.

"This body is nearing its limit," he muttered in a hoarse voice. To look at it, his body was certainly wasted away. But his eyes held a light as bright as fox fire. "It will soon be time to think of the 'next one'. But it is as I said to Guhl. Time is precious. Barbaroi too will start moving soon. But before that, Ax Baxgan. He has become something of a nuisance."

The elders gathered around him did not speak. Even so, perhaps there was a mutual understanding as the elder's attitude when he rose unsteadily to his feet was unconcerned.

"Normally I would wish to avoid direct measures but there is no help for it. We can't always keep our distance. Send word to Tahī. Tell her that even if she has to use some ether, she is to kill Ax."

"What would you have us do about Guhl?" Asked one who appeared to be older than the elder.

The elder smiled contemptuously. "Even if we let him be, he will move as we predicted. He can't escape anymore. He is trying to be strong-hearted and to put on a show of strength. That passion sticks to him like a mask made of flesh and controls his body," he declared. He then immediately erased his scornful look and his expression became as empty as when he had been facing Guhl.

"Having come to this, the designs we wove for destiny risk being disturbed. I know. This is probably linked to another's actions. For a start, Guhl approaching Ende now with the aim of breaking down the relationship between the three countries differs from the original plan. Still, the plan we wove is not so lightweight as to be thrown off course because of a single ripped seam. It's the 'wind'. If something goes off course, the 'wind' will immediately rise and automatically correct it. Such is what is called the original destiny. No one will be allowed to destroy it. Until those in Barbaroi awaken, we must do our utmost, as humans, to hold fast to this world."

Noticing the chamberlain's footsteps, Simon firmly shut the drawer.

The chamberlain bowed then entered the room and, as usual, piled the books that Simon had requested in one of its corners before leaving.

Simon picked up the book off the top and was flipping through it while standing, when he suddenly noticed that the room had gone dark. He went to the window and opened the curtains. Raindrops fell on the windowpane one by one. Then all at once, drops started pelting down on the window.

"A battle for revenge is it, Guhl?" Simon murmured as he faced towards the garden that was misty with rain, then looked towards the main palace that towered over the hills beyond it.

The house had received no callers since Princess Vileena had visited about half a month earlier.

However news naturally reached it. It was said that Emperor Guhl had sent soldiers to Apta and that they had traded blows once with Taúlia. He had not heard any details about the war but, as Guhl had roused the vassals' spirits by talking about a "war to avenge the crown prince," the results had probably been unsavoury. It seemed that the second and third set of troops to be sent to Apta were in the middle of preparing for departure.

As such, it would not be possible to avoid a large-scale war. And Simon worried about one other piece of information.

There is no news of the princess having returned to Solon.

There were no details about what had happened to her after she left for Nedain. Certainly, she had planned to stay there a week, but half a month had already passed since then. He had a bad feeling.

As things were, it felt like the emperor had delayed Princess Vileena's return to her country because, from the start, he had in mind a war with the west. For that reason, he had deliberately failed to hold a funeral for the crown prince. In order to avoid interference from Garbera, the emperor had needed the right timing to announce that the prince had been assassinated by the west.

Are you even going to use your own son's death?

When the council had ceased to exist in all but name, Simon had taken on the responsibility of watching over the prince. Since it was already clear that Guhl had no particular affection for Gil, his legitimate child, Simon had resolved to train him into becoming a fine successor.

But that too ended up only halfway done.

When the old friend, with whom he had faced the battlefield standing shoulder-to-shoulder and laughed with as they drank together, had changed he had not known what to do. Nor did he feel that he had much influence with that friend's son, Gil.

It seems I am a man who cannot guide people, neither as a friend nor as an educator.

Thinking about it, Guhl Mephius was also a man who had not been blessed when it came to parental care.

His mother had died when Guhl was not yet ten years old. She was devoured by a dragon before his eyes.

It had been the season for dragon hunting at a time when that had still been a form of entertainment throughout the country and, at the height of the hunt and at a moment when the soldiers had taken their eye off them, mother and child had gone out for a stroll.

From that, a conspiracy theory gradually emerged. It was said that a certain influential noble had had his subordinates skilfully lead the pair to the dragon in order to set up

his own daughter as the emperor's second wife.

From Simon's point of view as he looked back on it now, the emperor at the time, in other words Guhl's father, had been lacking in decisiveness. The conspiracy theory had never been denied but neither had that influential noble, whose name had come up, ever been accused - as a result, the country had been shaken.

Because his own life was said to be in danger, for half a year Guhl was barely able to set foot outside the imperial court. Simon, who had served by his side from those days, remembered Guhl's words at that time.

Because my father is like that, he was not able to protect my mother. That's right, Simon, it's the same as if that man had killed my mother, he had muttered savagely, his eyes glowering.

While Simon watched, the raindrops had spread across the windowpane and the view outside had become blurry. He returned to the front of the desk and reopened the drawer.

A gleaming black pistol was placed inside it.

CHAPTER 2

SCORCHING HEAT

PART 1

Zerdian merchants carrying goods were taking a rest along a mountain road; when suddenly there was a rumbling tremor, like an earthquake, and they stood up.

A cloud of dust flew up along the highway that they would be travelling along later. Slipping in and out of view from within it was a group of horses and dragons along with the warriors who were riding them. At the same time this scene could be observed over and over again throughout the west. Nomads, taking a short break from herding their sheep, and city-dwelling Zerdians, ploughing their fields near the outer walls, could see the whirling clouds of dust and hear the echo of horses' hooves along with the violent footsteps of dragons coming from across the plains or from hills overlooking them.

If it had been before they would probably have thought, half-resigned - *Ah... another city somewhere is starting a war.*

But it was different now. They halted their hands that were working and their feet that were travelling, raised their arms overhead and stamped their feet, unanimously praising the valour of Zerdian soldiers.

In Kadyne, there were two brave generals known as the Twin Dragons.

The older brother Moldorf, the Red Dragon, and the younger brother Nilgif, the Blue Dragon. When they raised their spear on horseback, it was said that there was no warrior in all the western lands who did not tremble.

It was past midnight when the notification reached them.

They were sitting on their knees facing each other, in the middle of a drinking contest.

Kadyne had suffered under Garda's control for a long time, and had furthermore been bombed, so even among the western lands the damage it had received was considerable. During the day, even bold generals took part in the city's reconstruction. With sweat on their brows, they carried away debris from the town area and helped with the building work. Moreover, a great many people had been injured during the bombing raid and, as there were not enough doctors to treat them, Nilgif and others rode their prized horses and travelled to and from Eimen, carrying more doctors.

As they were so busy during the day, the brothers drank the kumis they both enjoyed together at night. Although both of them were willing to endure a frugal lifestyle for the sake of their country's reconstruction, when it came to alcohol, it was impossible for them to resign themselves to thrift and honest poverty.

Kadyne's princess, Lima Khadein, understood that well.

"Consider that all the alcohol remaining in the town brewery is for the Twin Dragons," she had told the vassals.

The two had become "serious". Both of them had bet something in this drinking contest. Moldorf had wagered his cherished collection of crafted artworks; Nilgif had bet a fine horse he had inherited from their father. Since things had come to that, they were not going to stop. Even the warriors who would typically keep them company during banquets, when they heard that those two were "serious"...

"There's still tomorrow to think about."

"Oh? My old woman's calling from across the way."

Mumbling similar excuses, they dejectedly ran off.

When Moldorf and Nilgif became "serious", it wouldn't be over until the next morning. It wasn't only about the time, there was nothing half-baked about their pace either. Even a hard drinker would collapse within an hour if they tried to keep up with those two.

With an intense light in their eyes, both were resolutely and continuously gulping down wine, when an urgent summons arrived from Lima.

Apart from Lima Khadein, the entire royal family had been executed by Garda's army. The eighteen-year-old girl who had been left behind was their current master and the

sole heir to the throne.

There was no going against orders. Moldorf promptly stood up while Nilgif followed, heavily dragging his body that looked like a wine barrel. No matter how strong he was, this was right after downing no ordinary amount of liquor, and he seemed to be having trouble walking.

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"How unseemly, Nilgif. This is proof that your current training is lacking. Do you realise that your liege has personally summoned you and..."

As he was scolding his younger brother, Moldorf staggered, grabbed a nearby pillar so as not to keel over, and ended up spinning around it once. Nilgif laughed with far too much relish and blood rushed to Moldorf's head.

A few dozen minutes later.

"Oh my," said Lima Khadein before the Twin Dragons, who had come running.

Their faces were swollen all over.

"There is someone in Kadyne able to injure the Twin Dragons?"

"A thief broke in. A very formidable thief." Nilgif said. "It was probably a survivor from Garda's army that broke in. Right, Brother?"

"U-Uh huh," Moldorf nodded vigorously. But –

"The only ones who could injure the Twin Dragons are those self-same Twin Dragons. Moldorf, you are already at an age when you might be holding a grandchild. I won't tell you not to drink but please show some self-restraint." Lima said firmly. She had always had keen discernment. In front of the eighteen-year-old girl, the two of them couldn't help but shrink their huge frames into themselves.

"A messenger just came from Taúlia," when Lima cut to the main issue, the two quickly came back to themselves.

As the princess, who was clad in the scarlet garments that symbolised Kadyne's royal family, was in the middle of explaining what the messenger had said, the two opened

their eyes wide.

"W-What!"

"An invasion by Mephius!"

As everyone knew, Taúlia and Mephius should be bound in a peace agreement. Thanks to that, Governor-General Ax had been able to personally go and confront Garda's army in all-out war without needing to worry about Taúlia.

And yet, the border had breezily been crossed. Needless to say, it could only lead to an armed conflict.

"Just when we thought it was over with Garda, next it's Mephius?"

"They don't lose to Garda in viciousness. It looks like it's time for our spears to come out, Brother."

They had suddenly returned to lucidity, after liquor had made them lose their grip on self-control, because of the presence of their lord, Lima; along with the harsh wind that blew from the battlefield. Their faces indicated that the two of them had completely sobered up from their drunkenness. Looking at the Twin Dragons in turn, Lima said –

"Having talked with the staff officers, we will despatch a combined force of five hundred of Kadyne's cavalry and dragoons. That is most of the military strength that we have left. If Taúlia were to fall, the west would gradually start to collapse. Red Dragon. Blue Dragon. You will leave at once at the head of the troops."

"Aye," both bowed their heads.

As they were about to head off and immediately make preparations, Lima quietly called out to the older brother –

"Moldorf."

"Aye."

"The one who defeated Garda will be in Taúlia."

"Indeed, the boy... no, the warrior who called himself Orba."

"That person is Mephian."

"Aye."

"It may be difficult in a number of ways. This time, it is our turn to help him."

"I understand," Moldorf bowed his head once more then took his leave of Lima.

As he went down the corridor at a quick pace, calling in a loud voice for his men to gather, his mind was already mostly on the battlefield.

So, war again? Moldorf pondered casually as he wrapped armour over his lion-like physique, sheathed a sword in a well-worn leather scabbard, chose two or three of his favourite spears, and attached them to his saddle.

On one hand, hot blood was seething and pulsing from within the muscles and sinews that had grown thick over the years, while on the other a part of him was worried.

It would be good if it could be over quickly. With Taúlia as it is now, how long would they be able to maintain a war?

Yet, hidden behind his beard, his mouth curved into a smile.

"Right. That boy will be an ally this time." Moldorf muttered as he patted his favourite horse on the back of its neck. "As an enemy, he was one aggravating bastard, but there's no one who would make a more reassuring ally... Is what I'd like to say. But... not knowing what he's thinking might make him even eerier as an ally."



Elsewhere, far to the east of Kadyne and across Lake Soma, lay the city of Helio.

At the time of Garda's invasion, it was a state in which rebellions and uprising followed one after another and the ruler's name changed frequently. If the chaos dragged on, the people's anguish would naturally grow deep. It would not have been surprising if fresh conflicts had broken out, not only among the military and the nobles, but even the among common people or with other countries of the western lands; but instead the population's national unity had strengthened and turned towards the hope of having the legitimate royal line, comprised of Hardross and his grandson Rogier Helio, wrestled control back from the usurpers.

If Kadyne's heroes were the Red and Blue Dragons, Helio's hero was Lasvius.

As the commander of the dragoons, he was a man whose name had been known far and wide, even before Garda's war. Led by him, Helio's soldiers were the ones who had fired the first shot against Garda, who was on the verge of claiming absolute supremacy over the west. Because of that, the people of Helio bragged loudly that they themselves had pushed Garda back and the commander of the dragoons' fame grew even greater.

Lasvius, who had remained in Eimen for a long time after the war against Garda, had just returned to Helio.

Naturally, he had received a grand welcome from his men, his friends, and also the people of Helio.

Rogier Helio was, of course, also happy about Lasvius' return. Being the orphan of the late king, Elargon, he was first in line to inherit the throne. At eighteen, Princess Lima of Khadein was also young but he was still a child of nine years.

At present, Hardross, who had once abdicated the throne, was spurring on his old bones and was representing him. He had declared that he would soon chose a regent.

It had not been long since Lasvius had returned when Hardross hastily summoned him.

"Is it about Mephius?"

Lasvius' slender face looked strained. Hardross nodded.

"At present, Tauran cannot afford to be wrapped once more in the threat of war. Taúlia must set up a strong line of defence at all cost. We have finished making preparations for a force of approximately six hundred. You will lead them."

"Aye aye"

He was a man who could not be said to be lacking in composure amidst the clash of swords and the hails of bullets. That tendency had become even more marked since the time in which he had lain concealed in the Belgana Summits. Nor had he merely waged war as the leader of a single unit: during the campaign against Garda, he had frequently represented Helio at meetings with Taúlia's Governor-General Ax and Cherek's King Yamka II.

Those experiences had become excellent food for growth.

A ceremony for going into battle was held later. At Hardross' arrangement, the nine-year-old Rogier Helio was chosen to direct it. In front of a crowd of armed men, Rogier was certainly unable to hide his nervousness, but by nature he was not timid. He soon settled into the role and gave everyone his encouragements.

He is talented. Lasvius smiled.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Rogier came trotting up to him. As Lasvius respectfully bowed his head to him, he asked —

"You still haven't grown a beard?"

For a moment, Lasvius opened his eyes wide in surprise before answering, "I am still inexperienced. My penitence is not yet over."

Lasvius was bothered by his own slender face and had grown a beard in order to preserve his dignity as a commander but, out of regret at not having been able to save Helio from the fires of civil war, he shaved his beard each morning as a remonstrance to himself.

"Is that it?" Rogier grinned. "The retainers are saying that Lasvius must have found a woman he likes and that he doesn't let his beard grow because that woman praised him by saying that: 'The commander is dreamier now'."

"Who has been saying that?"

An unpleasant colour crept up into Lasvius face. It was a characteristic of his that he could not stand being an object of mockery. Rogier laughed all the more.

"That's also like the retainers say. That you can't take a joke, Lasvius."

"..."

Lasvius lowered his eyes as he almost inadvertently laughed back. Rogier suddenly brought his face close to Helio's greatest general.

"That man... he is in Taúlia now, isn't he?" He asked.

Understanding the nuance behind "that man" as spoken by the young royal, Lasvius nodded. "Probably."

"I was surprised when I heard that he had killed Garda. But I thought that since it's that man, then it's possible."

"I too reacted in that way."

"Please tell him that when everything is over, he should definitely come and have fun in Helio."

"Without fail."

This time, a smile formed on Lasvius' thin lips.

Among the warhorses that were starting off from the various western cities, Ax Bazgan naturally led his own troops of a thousand that had been stationed in Eimen and drove them forward to the highway.

"Damn Mephius!"

When Ax had received the news, he had taken his sharpened sword and cleaved the engraved spear, that decorated the wall of his room, clean in two. He had completely forgotten that this wasn't his office in Taúlia, but rather a room that he had been

allocated in a foreign country.

Currently, Ax was not only the governor-general of Taúlia but also held the title of leader of the Western Alliance.

Galloping forward without a thought, leaving it to his allies to follow, severely reprimanding those who were slow - he could no longer behave as he usually did. He had told the lords and military men from the various countries gathered in Eimen about Mephius' invasion; they had there and then promised reinforcements.

Consequently, he had left Eimen in the middle of the night of the day after he had received the news.

A few days later, as they were resting along the side of the road near a relay-station town on their descent of the Coldrin Hills, a messenger arrived from his home country of Taúlia.

Ax received the letter in his armour. The sun had already set but, after their break, he was up for starting off anew.

The defence corps led by General Bouwen Tedos had successfully repelled the first wave of Mephian troops who had marched over the border.

Ho, that man... He gets things done.

He was the adopted son of Archduke Hirgo Tedos, who had lost his life during the drama of the rebellion. Hirgo, who had served since the time of Ax's father, was such a large presence that receiving notice of his death had not seemed real to him, but now it appeared that Bouwen had grown into a figure no less trustworthy than his adoptive father.

Ax smiled at the report of victory but the problem lay with the latter half of the letter.

My lord, I would ask you to cross the River Kurán and head towards the lands of the nomadic tribes north of Helio, it said.

It also added that while Ax was the lord of Taúlia and had power of command over the allied western forces, it was fine if he entered the city at the end.

I wish to know a little more about Mephius' position. My lord, if you come rushing, the

fighting spirit will certainly soar to its highest and aim for a repeat of the glory that the western forces felt with the defeat of the evil sorcerer. However, assuming a situation in which that could not be curbed, and if Mephius concentrates its military strength in Apta, it might lead to a prolonged stand-off. In its present condition, Taúlia cannot afford to maintain soldiers from foreign countries for such long time.

"What?" Ax involuntarily roared out loud.

The letter continued on to say that it wanted him to issue an appeal to the nomadic tribes which were dotted around to the north of Helio.

None of the tribes which joined the punitive force against Garda are among them, but messengers will be sent to all of them in advance. If Lord Ax Bazgan goes to them in person, they should all assemble in one place. While you are organising their forces, please stay a while in Helio or wherever.

"That old geezer!"

Ax reflexively hurled abuse and tossed away the letter. If you thought about what was being said in that courteous phrasing it was, in short —

Since you might become a nuisance, go rally our allies' spirits and dampen those of the enemy from a safe distance. Also, since I've made preparations, go and increase our allies while you're at it.

Mephius had taken an aggressive stance but it appeared that not even Ravan could tell whether this would be over with the first confrontation or whether it would be another drawn-out war. He was afraid that if, at this time, Ax were recklessly set up to lead all the armies of the west - exactly as when they opposed Garda - he might not be able to return.

Ax was praised as the greatest hero in the west and almost no time had passed since he had defeated Garda. In other words, excessive expectations were placed on him. It could thus also be considered that if, right after waving his war fan as supreme commander, Ax did not achieve above a certain level of military success, faith in him would plummet in one go.

Therefore, Ravan thought to keep Ax away from Taúlia for now. By moving the army east from Helio, it was possible to cross the border and enter Mephian territory from a point other than Apta. Of course, although they would not be able to avoid fighting

with the border fortresses along there, not even Ravan thought things would come to that.

What was important was that Ax, the leader of the western alliance, should set up camp in a position from which he had the possibility to strike at the enemy country.

In addition, Mephius would surely realise that since the lord of Taúlia would have placed troops in Helio, the opponent in the war would not only be Taúlia but all the western lands.

"Hmph, that damn Ravan. It looks like his health is absolutely fine."

Ax had his personal slave burn the letter, then he modified the schedule of the march, and headed towards Helio after lodging at their current location.

There, he sent half of his force to Taúlia and, leading the remaining half, changed course towards the north. Since, among the troops who had travelled from Eimen with Ax, there was a unit composed of nomads from the same region, he followed their lead.

As it was the army of Ax, the leader of the alliance, in all the villages and towns that they went through there were many mercenaries and youths who petitioned them, saying: "I want to join your troops". Nor was it limited to them; because the military company was "profitable", a crowd of prostitutes and peddlers travelled along with it. They didn't only sell food and alcohol, there many shrewd salesmen who also widely sold armour and weapons collected from battlefields, as well as horses.

Among them, there was one merchant who was something of an oddity. In appearance, he was a small middle-aged man wrapped in a turban that had bird feathers stuck into it and the tip of his shoes were curled in. One might take him for some sort of entertainer but he lead three small dragons.

They looked a lot like Tengo, which Mephians and people in the west might use instead of horses, but they were a little shorter, exchanging height for more sturdy legs. On their heads grew what looked like a dark crest. Their nature was meeker than other dragons and two ran obediently on either side of the one that the merchant was straddling.

When they stopped for short breaks, or when they stayed overnight at a village, the merchant would stretch out on top of his saddle and the sound of snoring would rise up. He was popular with the prostitutes and the children who accompanied them because, when he felt like it, he would perform tricks that were like magic still sprawled out on top of the dragons.

One of Ax's soldiers, his curiosity aroused, asked him "Those are unusual dragons. You going to foist their sale on Lord Ax?"

"No," the merchant gently brushed a cheek whose complexion was oddly lustrous, "I was wondering if I could be hired as a clown." He said with a carefree smile.

Contact with Ax was of course refused. Still, in the end, he persistently travelled with them north of Helio, to the village nearest where the nomads had pitched their tents to prepare for their meeting with Ax. Perhaps because the tribal leaders were eager to be the first to greet Ax, a great number of tents had already been set up nearby and the village was buzzing with activity.

Watching this from the highest point in the village was the merchant. "It stinks, it really stinks," he muttered as he crinkled his nose. "An evil stench. This won't be settled easily... but it can't just be overlooked."

PART 2

In the barracks of the Fifth Army Corps, the mercenaries were in the middle of lunch. Because of their contribution to the victory, they were treated to more luxurious items than usual.

Even though it was only noon, alcohol was flowing. Actually, neither the quantity nor the quality was remotely sufficient.

Talcott was singing a sailor song that he had remembered from the time when he was in the navy off of the coastal countries. Everyone in the unit figured that when Talcott said "navy," ten to one he actually meant pirate. Vulgar metaphors were hidden throughout the comedic limerick and the feast was especially lively.

Amidst this, for once, Gilliam was not going along with Talcott's jokes; instead he was pecking at his food, sitting alone at the table with his chin resting on his hand. In his mouth, he had a meat bone which had been chewed clean.

Everyone was being considerate of Gilliam's feelings and didn't force him to join in the liveliness. The enemy they had fought against was Mephius. Since Gilliam was, of course Mephian, his state of mind was probably complicated; besides, being a long-time acquaintance of Captain Orba's, he certainly must be anxious about him - was what everyone thought.

He was thinking about Orba - in that sense, their guess had hit the mark. But he wasn't simply worrying about his well-being. The other mercenaries would never have imagined what Gilliam was thinking about at that time.

Maybe what Shique said wasn't a lie.

He had known Orba since their time in Tarkas' gladiator group but their relationship had not been one in which they shared friendly conversations. They had traded insults and had often almost gotten into fights. It was just that from time to time, he got the impression that — *That guy's got quick wits*. However, as they were nothing more than mere gladiators, only physical strength mattered; and in that sense, Orba was simply someone that he needed to be wary of if they had been forced to fight each other.

So when, meeting them after a long time, he had heard from Shique that — *Orba had held authority as the Imperial Crown Prince of Mephius* — he had taken it as an empty

joke. How could that taciturn man, who was only skilled in the art of the sword, have acted as the body-double for the country's crown prince? Even in a rundown theatre, if he had been given the role of the "prince," he would definitely have incurred the audience's displeasure for being miscast.

But —

As they fought together as mercenaries here in the Tauran region, that impression gradually changed.

It wasn't that he was just quick-witted. Unlike Gilliam, whose only worth lay in charging onto the battlefield waving his axe, Orba very carefully observed the ever-fluctuating state of the fight and could sense the outcome with his unique sense of "smell"...

Before anyone realised it, he was leading a unit that included Gilliam himself and then, again before anyone could realise it, he had become a hero whose name was famous throughout the west.

Gilliam could not say that he simply had luck on his side. He couldn't help but recognise that Orba possessed that kind of ability.

In which case —

Since the prince accomplished several military feats... He couldn't simply laugh it off as a tall story.

It was only now, as he had ceased being a gladiator, that he felt he could understand why Orba had obstinately hid his face. But if he accepted that, Gilliam would have yet another impression, not so much about Orba as an individual, but rather about the war.

For that guy to fight against Mephius...

Shique came rushing into the dining room.

He had run in as though he had hell on his heels and the soldiers' minds and body went tense with the dread of another invasion by Mephius. Even Talcott instantly stopped singing.

"Orba has woken up!"

At that, the place erupted even more than before.

Orba was crouching in viscous mud.

The ground was a strange reddish brown and there was the smell of blood.

His entire body was incredibly heavy.

Orba groaned in displeasure and put strength into his whole frame to try and break out, but for a while now already, he had been completely unable to move. Because he was submerged up to his neck, he even had difficulty shifting his head.

When he finally managed to raise it, he caught sight of the figure of a lone woman walking.

Her hands were bound with rope. Behind her, men that looked like armed soldiers were prodding her with their spears and were making her walk further and further forward even as she staggered.

Marilène — Orba called out in his mind. He remembered this scene. In order to protect the royal family that she had married into, Queen Marilène of Helio had deliberately chosen a path of dishonour and of execution by the people.

Was he watching a scene from his memory or a reconstruction within a dream? While Orba strained his eyes, Marilène's figure gradually turned into that of another person. Vileena Owell.

A girl of fourteen. She too had left to marry into a foreign country.

Vileena was being made to walk like a criminal. Orba instinctively tried to stand up and run after them. But his entire body was still being restrained by the mud and he couldn't move an inch from where he was.

Wait.

Just as Orba was about to yell —

"Traitor"

— He heard a voice hurl abuse at Vileena. Before Orba even had time to be surprised, voices carrying curses rained down one after another.

"You sold out to Mephius."

"You betrayed Garbera."

At some point, the reddish black soil near Orba had swollen up and turned into human-shaped clay dolls that were all shouting angrily.

"Execute her."

The earth bulged in front of Orba.

"That woman betrayed her country and went with the enemy, cut off her head!"

Now it was at Orba's side. Then —

"Kill her."

"Kill her."

"Kill her!"

All around Orba and from every direction the cries rang out in unison.

At the same moment, Vileena stopped. This time, it was the ground in front of her which rumbled and swelled. She was again pushed from behind by the spears and was made to walk once more along the ground that was now shaped like stairs. At the top, which was dark and slimy with the colour of blood, she was made to kneel.

Stop.

Urged on by a bad premonition, Orba struggled desperately. The bones in his arms and legs creaked and his skin almost split as he twisted his body in impossible contortions.

Stop.

Even his voice wouldn't leave his open mouth and all that came out was the empty sound of whistling air.

A soldier behind the forcibly kneeling Vileena stirred slightly. At that, like the lumps of earth, the spear in his hands shifted and turned into a huge axe.

He casually raised it overhead.

It was just as Orba had feared.

For a moment, it remained quiet and still in the air then, with a rush of air, it swung down with force.

"Stop!"

When he finally found his voice – Orba was on a bed.

It was about an hour before Shique received the news and had sprung up in delight.

It was an infirmary within the Court used exclusively by nobles. At a glance, it was a pure white room filled with a sense of cleanliness. If he had not stopped to reconsider it, Orba would certainly have thought that he had lost his life, been called to the Dragon Gods' side, and joined the ranks of those-at-arms^[1] as told in Mephian tradition.

The gods really don't want my soul, huh?

Above all, his entire body was wracked with pain. The throbbing at his forehead and neck was especially intense. The pain connected directly to memories of the battle.

The memory of being shot and of falling from his horse flashed sharply across his mind. Orba gently moved his arms and legs. His chest and back hurt but he didn't seem to have any broken bones.

I can hold a sword.

To check that before all else could be called a gladiator's habit. Even if they survived the day's battle, if they were injured to the point that they could no longer pick up a sword, they would certainly die in the next day's fight. When he looked over, there was

a mask placed beside the bed. Although it should have been smashed by the bullet, it emitted the glow of brand-new iron.

Orba worriedly touched his face. The upper half was tightly bandaged from his forehead to his cheeks. However, the rest of the skin was, of course, exposed. It was very similar to his bandaged appearance when he had deceived those around him by saying that he had "caught an infectious disease a long time ago."

At that point, a man in a white coat entered. Reacting like a wild beast determined to prevent others from stealing the prey it had just hunted, Orba quickly snatched up the mask and rammed it on his face.

"Oh, did you just wake up?" The elderly man asked admiringly, not seeming particularly fazed by Orba's state. He came up so close to him it was almost rude and waved a hand before his eyes. "Can you see properly? Are there any changes in your physical sensations? Do you feel nauseous or dizzy?"

Orba stayed silent for a few moments as though consulting with himself. After a while, he shook his head. And said almost forcibly that he was absolutely starving. "Is that right?" The man broke out into a broad smile.

"You've been in a coma after receiving a violent shock. If that had continued for another three days, your life would have been in danger – people's brains are surprisingly fragile, you know – but that's a hero for you. You can be thankful for your tough body and your luck. From now on and for at least a month, you should go and visit a temple every day without fail... Ah, but since a fragment from the mask bit deeply into your forehead, although of course I removed it completely, you had best resign yourself to bearing a scar for the rest of your life. Well, that's like a mark of honour for warriors, isn't it? Besides, there won't be many opportunities for it to be exposed since you have a mask."

The man introduced himself as Faisal, a physician.

Having been informed of the details of how he was brought there, Orba understood that Esmena had gone to great pains to prevent his identity from being revealed. The new mask had also been arranged by the princess.

Although Faisal had, of course, seen through the fact that Orba must have some kind of unusual circumstances, so he deliberately avoided speaking about it.

"There was a long line of people wanting to come and visit you. As per the princess' orders, I sent them all away. And thanks to that, the rumour that your condition was critical and that you are on the verge of death has spread about. It's good that you have woken up, but you are going to have a tough time with all the courtesy calls from here on."

"And Mephius?"

"Hmm?"

Orba half-raised his body. Bandages were also wrapped around his naked torso. There shouldn't be any injuries from his neck down so this was probably also thanks to the princess or Shique, who knew the situation.

"Has Mephius made a move? How long have I been asleep?"

"Ah, the hardships of being a hero. You have been unconscious this whole time. Your life was certainly in danger and it wouldn't be strange if there was a lingering effect or two remaining. And yet you wake up and immediately start talking about the war."

Even though he said so, Faisal explained that in the nearly two days that Orba had been in a coma, there had been no conspicuous movements from Mephius' side.

After that, having no doubt been among the first to receive the news, General Bouwen Tedos came to visit.

"They've come fast." As he took his leave, Faisal whispered quietly, "He will come to realise how lucky he was to be able to sleep in complete peace these past two days."

After Faisal had disappeared, Orba bowed his head. "That you for coming in person, General – I'm sorry about this. I made a poor showing."

"Don't worry about it. What matters most is that you're well. And besides, I know that you protected me. The fault is mine for not having noticed the presence of an enemy."

Even though Bouwen was giving a relieved sigh, he was still armed. It seemed there had been no change in the situation and there was still no saying when the enemy might attack.

"Rest up for a bit. There's nothing to worry about. Reinforcements will soon be

arriving in Taúlia. According to the information brought by courier, first among them will be Helio's Dragoon Commander Lasvius, who should already be on his way."

"Lasvius is it?"

"I also owe him a debt of gratitude. Perhaps this time we will fight side-by-side. Well – it's best if something like war doesn't break out though."

With the betrayal of the mercenary commander Greygun, Bouwen had been seriously wounded at the battle of Coldrin Hills. After that, he had been reliant on Lasvius' unit as they lay concealed in the Belgana Summits and received treatment from them.

At least for now – Although Bouwen's expression was still cautious, perhaps because he felt that they had escaped from a predicament, it had grown a little brighter.

However, a portion of the people from both the west and Mephius were worried that if the battle formations on each side continued to swell, there was a risk that it would no longer be possible to pull back. Bouwen also wanted to avoid a long war at this point in time. On top of that, there was a matter that had not left Orba's mind since before the start of his conversation with Bouwen.

"It's been nonstop since the war against Garda, huh. Where does it leave us Zerdian soldiers if a foreigner takes all the glory? Take a break for a while."

As Bouwen said that with a smile and got up to leave, Orba finally couldn't take it anymore.

"Garbera's princess," he said, "has there been a messenger to say where Garbera's princess is now?"

"..."

Bouwen's smile faded and he remained silent. He mechanically shifted his focus towards the window.

Outside, the sun had descended slightly from its zenith. The weather was dull. Perhaps because of artillery practice, in the distance the roar of cannons sounded once– then twice. Bouwen however did not show concern.

The one who brought us the information wasn't Mephian. It was Garbera's princess,

Vileena Owell.

It was Bouwen himself who had told Orba that. In that instant, Orba had been shot by an enemy soldier lying concealed beneath corpses.

"General."

"The Princess is..." After hesitating a moment, Bouwen spoke, still gazing out from the window. "At present, she is missing."

"Eh?"

"Her whereabouts are unknown. After coming to us as a messenger, the Princess said that she would return to Apta. But at that time the enemy had already crossed over the border. The Princess came back to Taúlia's territory and joined up with us who were already marching."

Naturally, Bouwen had been surprised, but they had to begin their manoeuvres to draw the enemy in at once. The one who had drawn up that tactics had been none other than Orba. Since timing was essential, Bouwen hadn't really been able to take care of the princess. And then –

"According to eyewitness accounts from the soldiers, she used her airship to interrupt the charge of the enemy soldiers. Honestly... what an impossible princess. When she flew her ship straight at the enemy cavalry, which was hot on our heels, it was enough to make even our Zerdian soldiers flinch, you know."

That – Orba held his breath and remembered the battlefield.

Because Nabarl, the enemy commander-in-chief, had neutralised their riflemen earlier than expected, and faster than Orba could come rushing in as reinforcement, the pursuers had almost made it close enough to strike at the tail end of Bouwen's main forces. As they were on the verge of doing so, an airship had flown straight at the enemy. Orba had frankly admired the courage and piloting skill involved.

Thanks to that charge, Nabarl's pursuit was thrown into confusion, even if only by a little. If it hadn't been for that, they would have paid a heavy cost.

Vileena.

Without realising it, Orba was biting down strongly on his lower lip.

In itself, it was unthinkable for someone in her situation to have informed Taúlia of Mephius' attack. Even though she was a guest from another country, Mephius would not leave the princess unpunished. It also had to be considered that relations with her home country of Garbera would take a sudden turn for the worse.

Why did she do something so stupid – he thought, but the answer was already obvious. It was simply –

Because it's Vileena.

Because it was Vileena, she would not allow a partner with whom they had once made peace be attacked without warning. Because it was Vileena, she would not be able to shut her eyes to it, even if it put her in danger, even if Mephius and her home country vilified her as a traitor because of it.

He felt like shuddering.

The scene from the nightmare he had just had was seared into his brain and wouldn't leave it.

Bouwen's eyes were still turned towards the outside

"There is the possibility that she returned to Mephius, but at any rate, her figure vanished from sight in the middle of the battle." He sighed softly. "Of course, I have currently sent people to search in the outskirts of Taúlia. But unfortunately, in this wartime situation, and because we can't openly have anything to do with the princess, we can't mobilise too many people. The princess is the benefactor of all Taúlians and we want to protect her as best we can but..."

"Orba!"

Shique burst into the room ahead of the others but the smile that covered his entire face vanished in an instant.

The man who should have been lying flat on the bed was wearing a leather vest and, with his mask on, was in the middle of fixing his clothes.

"H-Hang on, Orba," Shique rushed over to his side. "You always do things so suddenly that I sometimes wonder if you aren't deliberately trying to startle me. Rest up. There's nothing you need to be in such a hurry over."

"I'm going to go look for her."



"Eh?"

"There's no way you don't know, right. That Vileena has gone missing."

Orba glared at Shique from the corner of his eye. Exactly as though he were looking at an enemy. Shique was left dumbfounded for a moment but then quickly turned around to Gilliam and the others who were about to enter the room behind him.

"Oi, what's up? What're you trying to pull?"

"There are no visitors allowed."

"What?"

"Please, everyone out."

Shique didn't have his usual expression. Orba could be seen over his shoulder. Gilliam was about to ask what the trouble was when he suddenly sensed something. If, as he had been thinking earlier, the story about Orba having been the crown prince's body-double was true, there would definitely be one or two conversations that weren't for just anyone else's ears.

Tsk.

Feeling like he was being treated as an outsider, Gilliam turned his large body around. Talcott, who was stepping into the room, banged his nose against the massive chest.

"Ow... The hell, Jumbo!"

"We're going back for today," said Gilliam, sounding unamused. "For the time being, the capt'n has safely woken up. Let's leave him alone for now."

Catching the protesting Talcott by the scruff of the neck and hauling him by force, he took everyone out. After Gilliam himself had also left the room, Shique made sure that the door was shut.

"Orba," Shique once more turned to look at him. "What's this about the princess' whereabouts being unknown? I truly haven't heard anything about it."

Pulling on his boots, Orba was about to go searching right then. Shique placated him

and somehow got him to explain the situation. When he heard about it, he was rendered speechless in spite of himself. Back when he was an Imperial Guard, Shique had been unusually supportive of Garbera's Princess Vileena. Upon learning that she was in danger, he naturally couldn't stay calm.

Before him however was a man who was even more about to lose his composure. At a glance, he appeared to be the usual cool and infuriatingly detached Orba, but Shique could clearly see the impatience and the worry behind the iron mask.

"It's no good, Orba. What you're saying now won't do."

"What won't do?"

"Taúlia is currently in the middle of a war. A person in your position, with men under you, can't just do whatever you want. General Bouwen came by earlier but you didn't get permission from him, right?"

"That has -"

"*Everything* to do with it. You stand out too much. At present, that's true everywhere in western Tauran. Anyone would recognise you at first glance." Just as Orba had done earlier, Shique was shooting glares as though to an enemy. "If you move around, you'll be suspected of who knows what. It's no good talking about a search."

"There's nothing to talk about. Move, Shique."

Orba's voice grew louder and he was about to push Shique's shoulder out of the way but –

"I will not move. Have you forgotten, Orba? You are Mephian. And right now, the enemy fighting Taúlia is Mephius."

Orba stopped moving as that was pointed out.

"In the current circumstances, what will happen if you move however you please? You'll be suspected of being connected to Mephius. And not just you, all of us – all of us in the unit who follow you, who move according to your orders and act as your shield and spear – would be denounced as traitors and imprisoned.

"..."

"There's no choice but to leave the princess to General Bouwen for now. I'll try to gather information as well. There might be some clue to be found in the incoming reports..."

"Shut up," Orba shouted angrily and swung his arm. Shique thought that it would hit him on the cheek but the fist was flung not at his face but at the wall beside it.

"Get out!"

With a serious expression, Shique looked in turn at Orba and at the fist; then, when he had made sure that Orba had turned his back and returned to the bed, he took out something that was tucked at his breast. He placed it on top of a shelf near the bed which was used for water pitchers and the like, then calmly left the room.

There was the sound of the door opening and closing then, a dozen or so seconds later –

"Shit!"

Orba struck hard at the wall once more.

What Shique was saying was something he knew all too well. In truth, Orba's resentment was directed more towards himself than the current situation; as, even though he was aware of it, he had still been unable to keep his emotions under control. To start with, it was the same reason that had caused him to be injured and lose consciousness for two days.

During a war, he had forgotten himself.

Be it in the arena or on the battlefield, when death was lurking, those who could not assess and control themselves died one after another. Orba had watched such scenes innumerable times.

Two days. Two days?

Because of his own mess, he had wasted time.

If the princess had not returned to Mephius, then the risk rose drastically. If things went badly – even if he tried not to think about it, Orba's heart tightened painfully.

Is it too late?

That thought suddenly crossed his mind.

And at that thought, his mind and body froze completely. Orba had known the regret of being "too late" once already. When he had seen the gravestone for his brother, Roan. At that time, feeling that he had been too slow to go to Apta, that his actions had been too sluggish, Orba had fallen to his knees sobbing.

"It's not too late."

Orba said, clenching his teeth. If he had wasted time then he had to work hard to quickly make up for it. There was no time to think about it anymore.

A moment passed and he noticed what Shique had put on the shelf beside the bed.

It was a scrap of paper. When they were officially admitted into Taúlia's army, as part of their pay as non-commissioned officers, Orba and several of the soldiers under him were allocated a few high-quality everyday articles for daily use. One of these was a sheaf of paper.

His eyes caught by the whiteness of the paper, Orba picked it up then stared at it fixedly.

The news that Orba had woken up had not only reached Bouwen, Shique, and the others.

However, in this case the news did not arrive through an official messenger from the doctor. There was a report from men keeping watch on the area that 'General Bouwen visited the medical office' and so it was determined that Orba had regained consciousness.

The one who received the report was the commander of the Sixth Army Corps, Natokk.

With his swarthy skin and his slender, hawk-like face, he was a soldier whose appearance was typically Zerdian. At the time of the surprise attack on Apta, Ax had

entrusted him with the command of the first assault troops.

"Reinforce the watch," Natokk ordered. "Not only on Orba, but on each of his men who are Mephian as well. Report each of their actions, even the most trivial... What is it?"

His reason for asking that was the expression which crossed the face of the subordinate he had given the order to. The man lowered his head as though to apologise for his rudeness. Natokk's glance grew sharp.

"I understand. He is the hero who saved the west. I don't want to do this either. However, if there is nothing, even if he is Mephian, we will have no reason to doubt him anymore. That is why I'm giving you this task. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" His subordinate stood at attention.

After having made sure that the man had left, Natokk, now alone, wore an expression as complicated as his subordinate's had just been.

But on the night of the day after he had received that report, a commotion suddenly erupted in the barracks of the Sixth Army Corps...

PART 3

It was midnight when Orba summoned Shique. Not to the medical office but to the private room allocated to him as a captain of the Fifth Army Corps. He had apparently been difficult and had forcibly ended his medical treatment.

Even though he has only just woken up.

Although he understood that his feelings were unsettled because of the princess and the war with Mephius, being unreasonable at this point in time could lead to the irreparable damage. Although he didn't want to get into another quarrel, Shique made up his mind to give him a scolding and opened the door.

Oh.

The words he had prepared however vanished the instant he stepped into the room. Orba was alone inside it. But the atmosphere surrounding him was clearly different from when they had seen each other in the infirmary.

Without any preface, Orba took a letter from the desk in front of him.

"I want you to deliver this to Apta," he said.

Shique gaped. Apta was, of course, within Mephiian territory and, needless to say, was currently an enemy land.

"Can I read it?"

"Sure."

Orba gave permission while still looking the other way. He didn't seem to want to look the subordinate he had called over at midnight in the eye. Realising why, Shique unintentionally broke into a grin, but when he read the contents, his desire to poke fun at Orba was blown away in one go.

This is -

After reading it once, he returned once again to the start of the document. Orba, who was being kept waiting, uncrossed and re-crossed his legs and looked about him

restlessly but Shique deliberately took his time rereading. Then –

"The contents are pretty unexpected."

"Yeah. But he's in Apta..."

"You're saying to deliver this to General Rogue Saian, right?"

Correct – Orba seemed to say as he nodded wordlessly.

General Rogue Saian was in Apta. The one who had brought that information to Orba was none other than Shique. While Orba was in a coma, he had probed around for information about Mephius' side. Lodging in Taúlia as a trader who was on an errand for the wealthy Birac merchant, Zaj Haman.

"Because of this sudden war, it's not easy to get back home," he had grumbled as he sat in a tavern.

By plying that merchant with drink, Shique had gotten the information that generals Rogue and Odyne had gone to Apta. Shique had summarised the information on paper and had intended to give a verbal explanation of it, but as it didn't seem like Orba was inclined to lend him an ear, he had left the memo for him.

Shique once more gave a cursory look at the contents of the letter that Orba had handed over to him. The sender's name was not *Orba*. The signature read –

Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius.

That could only mean one thing.

Orba was going to revive "Gil Mephius" whom he was supposed to have buried.

After announcing that Gil was living on in Taúlia, the letter explained that –

Having learned about General Oubary's plan to assassinate me, I deliberately made myself disappear and went over to Taúlia.

In short, the letter denounced Emperor's Guhl's declaration that Taúlia was behind Gil's death as nothing more than a fabricated charge, then continued –

Who within Mephius' military currently wants war with Taúlia? There is only one person who wishes for it, my father Guhl Mephius. Do not make the mistake of going against your heart. If you are commanders who truly love Mephius and whose duty it is to protect its people, you should know what you have to do.

With that said, Rogue and the others could not be expected to believe in Prince Gil's survival simply on the basis of a single letter. Because of that, Orba concluded the document saying he would personally appear in Apta three days after the letter had reached them.

"Three days..." Shique murmured in a low voice.

The three-day deferment also gave Rogue and Odyne a delay in which to make a decision. In other words, in the time it gave them to wait for verification on whether or not Prince Gil was still alive, they would also have time to consider how they should act in the event that it was true.

To ignore Emperor Guhl's – to ignore Mephius' orders, was to defy him, which meant treason against their country. No matter how little the retainers might like the emperor's words and deeds, it was not an easy decision to make.

But what if the crown prince, who had undeniably inherited the same imperial blood, stood behind them?

"Orba"

"Yeah"

Orba looked Shique in the eyes for the first time. Shique had a hundred things he wanted to say but, as they stared at each other, those were cleared away in an instant.

To head towards Apta as Gil was equivalent to throwing away his current position as the hero whose praises were sung throughout the west. To appear as Gil was to throw away the carefully fabricated fact of his death and to cast himself once more into the great vortex at the forefront of history.

"Don't regret it, okay."

"Yeah."

Shique was seized by the urge to soliloquy at length. To prevent war between the two countries – that was not a simple decision leading to a single result. To use a slightly exaggerated expression, it could probably be called a turning point in history.

However, while inwardly thinking one thing, Shique said another.

"You're somewhat lacking in with words, Orba."

"Words?"

"We're currently quarrelling. Oh, did you forget? When I was making a reasonable point, who was it now who yelled 'Get out'? Only summoning the other at your convenience, giving out orders without listening to what they have to say, surely it's not as if you want to play the part of the callous prince?"

Even though nobody could know what Orba's expression was behind the mask, he understood it perfectly. But that was enough for Shique. Just as he was about to burst out with "That was a joke", Orba spoke.

"I'm sorry."

Shique was flabbergasted. Orba spoke again –

"You're the only one I can ask. Please, Shique. Take this letter to Apta."

"I-I get it. I get it," as a way of hiding his embarrassment, Shique deliberately laughed proudly. "You're going to say to leave at once, right? I get it, the great Shique will carry it off perfectly. Because you just can't do anything without me."

After Shique left, Orba turned the light off in the room.

He crawled into bed but didn't close his eyes.

Something separated itself from the shadows.

When he stared hard at the darkness, something which looked vaguely like a ghost

took shape and came into sight.

No, wouldn't it actually be a ghost?

A person with the same face as him – Gil Mephius.

A person that he should have once buried with his own hands. A ghost that he was now going to resurrect from the grave with those same hands.

Of course, there were a number of paths that had led to that decision.

As he had told Shique, his mind was made up and he believed that he would not regret it. But be that as it may, he felt a strange uncertainty. Hadn't he rushed too fast down the paths that led to his decision? In other words, did he miss any crucial elements needed for the future he envisioned to become reality?

Stupid.

Orba glared at Gil's pallid face. New shapes appeared and flickered indistinctly behind him, those of Guhl Mephius and of the flames of war encircling all of the west.

It wasn't too late yet.

So there was no need to rush too quickly either.

Orba closed his eyes. Within seconds, he was engulfed in the complete darkness.

From under the window, there was a roar like a beast howling.

Gunshot.

His eyes suddenly wrenched open.

What had come back to him was the very moment when he had been shot on the battlefield. At that time when Orba had lost sight of himself on the battleground. Just now, Orba had felt again the feeling of having lost himself, of being helpless, of hesitating when detected by the "enemy," and of having been shot in the head.

An hour after leaving Orba's room, Shique was on horseback.

He had given the old soldier on guard duty at the stables a small amount of the alcohol that was served in the barracks, claiming it was "refreshments," and had then listened to his long, boastful war stories. When the soldier grew careless and began to doze against the wall, Shique quietly left him and went to choose a horse for himself.

Throwing himself onto the saddle, he proceeded through the still and silent barracks.

He waved at the sentries standing on the way from the barracks to the castle gate as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Wow, it's Shique from Orba's unit.

These soldiers were the complete opposite from the one at the stables, both from their obvious youth and the gazes they sent filled with aspiration towards the former gladiator.

He passed out of the castle gate.

The lamp Shique held up faintly illuminated the darkness and, while patting the neck of his nervous horse, he followed the road to the east. Once he had safely left Taúlia, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Still, I was surprised.

Orba had honestly apologised. He kept going over that scene in his mind. Actually, it couldn't be said that he was happy from the bottom of his heart about it.

It's not like him. He has more of the charm of childhood when he keeps complaining and cursing. Well, although I admit that he's adorable when he is being honest.

The letter that Orba had written was, of course, tucked at his breast. By nature, Orba's penmanship was terrible; but before, when he was still a body-double, he had referenced available notes written by Gil Mephius in order to imitated his handwriting. Such as when he had written a letter incorporating Shique and the other former gladiators into his own Imperial Guards.

As he remembered how desperately Orba had been back then, trying to memorise that penmanship while writing, Shique couldn't help but also find that adorable.

That Orba was going to return to the front stage of history again.

Shique had deliberately avoided questioning him too deeply about it. After he had been released from vengeance, it had seemed as though Orba's true face had steadily started to show through, but it was probable that not even he himself knew what to expect if he once more put on the "mask" of Gil.

The world of the aristocracy was nothing more than a hell of never-ending strife.

Every kind of desire, in every shape and form, lurked behind the rows of smiling faces and the sequences of flowery words.

Shique had no way of knowing the deepest recesses of that world, but he had actually come into contact with one small part of it. And from just that small part, the indelible scars on his heart had turned into a brand that had been seared into him.

They're the flames of Laskeid. Remembering that old legend as he rode forward, Shique felt like shivering.

Then –

"Wait"

A voice came from in front of him. No, the same thing was coming from behind him.

When Shique swiftly swept his gaze around, he had already been surrounded.

In every direction, the light from his lamp illuminated Zerdian faces.

And in their hands, they warily held up swords and guns.

CHAPTER 3

EMBERS OF WAR

PART 1

“Please wait,” changing his tone, one of them stepped towards Shique. Judging from his weapons, he was undoubtedly a Taúlian soldier. “Where are you going, Sir Shique? Your unit should not have received any orders this evening, I believe.”

There were seven or eight of them. Each of them set alight the torches in their hands at the same time. As his figure was brought to light by the fire, Shique desperately repressed his inner turmoil.

Judging by the fact that they had deliberately extinguished the fires and concealed themselves, they could not have followed him from Taúlia. The ambush had been set from the start. In other words, Orba’s surroundings must have been kept under vigilant surveillance for some time already.

Having been caught here, if the secret message tucked at his breast was found, the situation would veer off in the worst possible direction. It would probably not end well for Orba either. Shique deliberately plastered a smile on his face.

“Hello, thank you for your hard work. But isn’t this a bit overboard? I’m an ally, even if I am a Mephian.”

“I would like you to prove that. Could you come over here?”

Those who were surrounding Shique were subordinates of Natokk, the commander of the Sixth Army Corps. The one who had ordered them to keep watch on Orba was the lord of Taúlia, Ax Bazgan himself.

Because Orba had been quick to leave Eimen, Ax had become suspicious about his identity. It wasn’t that he particularly sensed signs of betrayal from him. But it was certain that Orba was no longer a disposable mercenary.

So Ax had instructed his men to follow Orba, ordering them to keep him under surveillance and to monitor his movements. His choice of who to put on the job was

nothing more than coincidence, but when Natokk had received the order, a thought had struck to him...

Just at the same time, a certain rumour had been circulating among Natokk's men. It concerned Orba, the hero who had defeated Garda.

Previously, Natokk's unit had been the at the vanguard of the attack on Apta. While a detached force moved to the enemy's rear, they had been tasked with drawing the enemy's attention but, instead of catching Mephius in a trap, they had been the ones to fall into an ambush.

The one leading the unit which had performed that ambush was a swordsman in an iron mask.

He himself had not given his name as "Orba". Once they had made peace with Mephius however, information from neighbouring countries far and wide had all at once become available. Of course, this included the many heroic activities accomplished in just under half a year by Gil Mephius, who had overcome Ax's forces and who on top of that had made a peace settlement, and among that information were anecdotes about one of his subordinates, a mysterious masked swordsman. He had defeated Garbera's great general Ryucown then had magnificently won the gladiatorial competition held in Mephius' capital, Solon.

It seemed that his name was Orba.

The rumour had spread among Natokk's subordinates. Natokk himself had heard it very shortly after Garda's defeat. A masked swordsman of the same name. Natokk had only caught a glimpse of either of them, but their build looked the same.

Is it a coincidence or...

Just as he had been seized by a sudden suspicion, he had received orders from Ax to monitor Orba. Consequently, Natokk has tightened the watch on him more thoroughly than anyone else would have done if they had received those instructions.

Shique had been caught in that surveillance net.

"It's exactly as though I was the enemy," he put on a sulky expression even as he was conscious of being in a cold sweat. "The ones who defeated Garda was our unit. You can't possibly be thinking that I'm a spy sent by Garda or by Mephius, can you?"

“I am requesting proof of that. If you can prove your innocence, as an apology for our rudeness, it will be our treat. It’s already so late. We could be relaxing and exchanging toasts.”

“So what? I shouldn’t have bothered coming to a country like this. Maybe I should tell Orba to hurry up and move the unit out?”

Shique’s eyes darted about while he pretended to turn back.

Should I go back for now? He wondered but judging from the state of the soldiers, he would not be able to avoid an investigation if he turned on his heels now.

In that case —

“Shit, this is stupid. I’ve had it with being a Taúlian mercenary. *I’m* going back to Mephius. Give my regards to the masked gentleman. Next time we meet, we’ll be on different sides. I accept that our bond was just that weak. But you can tell him that I won’t forgive him either.”

He had no choice but to drive his horse forward as soon as he saw a chance.

Afterwards, Orba would be able to treat him as a “deserter”. If the net stretched further, Orba would of course also be investigated but as long as the secret message didn’t come to light, as the hero who had saved the west, he should be able to pull through.

The net around Shique grew even narrower. The one in the lead raised the gun he held. Even if he spurred on his horse, his odds for success were fifty-fifty. Just as he was about to give a sharp kick to his horse’s flank —

“Uwah!”

“Ow, w-what the...”

The ring of soldiers was momentarily thrown into confusion. From the distance, stones had been thrown at them.

“Ahoy there, you Zerdian soldiers! You picking a fight with a member of our unit?”

The disconcerted soldiers shone the light towards the voice and a huge shadow suddenly came into view.

“Gilliam!”

Exactly as Shique’s shout indicated, the figure that had appeared was that of the giant mercenary Gilliam. He shook his mane-like hair and beard while giving a threatening smile.

“What’re you planning on doing if Mephius attacks again while you’re having your internal quarrel? If he wants to go, let him go. A soldier who runs away at the last moment is useless from the start.”

“Please wait, Sir Gilliam. We haven’t – Yeow!”

The stone Gilliam threw hit the protesting soldier right on the nose. The Mephian was acting as flippant as though he were drunk.

“Oi, Shique. We’ve known each other for a long time but this is goodbye. Wherever it is you’re going, get out of here fast. But mark my words, if we meet on the battlefield, I won’t let you off. I’ve been thinking for a while now that you’re obnoxious so if I see you, I’ll go straight for your head.”

“That’s exactly what I was hoping for,” Shique laughed cheerfully.

“Wait. Bastards, doing what you please...”

Several of the soldiers turned on Gilliam. Even though he was hurling stones at them, they closed in on him and tried to subdue him. Gilliam however easily took on the charging soldiers and knocked them down.

Now.

Seizing his chance the moment their attention was distracted, Shique gave a sharp kick to his horse’s flank. With a neigh, the horse started sprinting forward.

“W-Wait!”

The Taúlian soldiers tried to hurriedly grab the horse’s neck or Shique’s feet, but their hands missed. Carried on his horse, Shique was about to disappear into the darkness beyond their lights.

“Shit!”

The soldiers had received strict orders from Natokk. One of them raised the gun he had been pulling out. He was going to aim for the horse, but its shape had already been almost entirely swallowed up by the shadows. Although his aim wasn't fixed, he still pulled the trigger.

A gunshot.

Along with it, the shadow on horseback seemed to jerk violently; but maybe he had merely been grazed, or maybe he just been surprised by the sound of the shot, as he immediately righted his posture and disappeared from sight.

Left behind, Gilliam laughed cheerfully. The soldiers soon all crowded around him but even though he could no longer move, he still laughed.

Hmph. Inwardly, the one he was jeering at was himself. Achieving all these feats and thinking our treatment would change from when we were gladiators.

Gilliam hadn't leapt into action because he had understood everything that Orba and Shique were aiming for. It was simply that he couldn't stand how Shique, after it having been just him and Orba in the medical office, had sneakily moved around alone. Actually, the one he found "obnoxious" was that boy whose thoughts were impossible to understand.

But —

That guy always makes his moves to win.

He certainly recognised that. And so, he thought that if necessary, he might just lend his strength for the sake of that. He thought that if he wielded his axe near where that boy was, he might see something beyond what he had known until now.

At any rate, the crown prince of Mephius and the hero of the west. There aren't two such interesting guys in this world.

In the past, Gilliam had once been a soldier who had sided with a certain faction. Having lost that fight, he had fallen into slavery and had swung swords and axes as a gladiator. Currently, he was in the middle of gaining renown as a mercenary.

But what could the position of mercenary lead to? If his was going to be a life of brandishing steel without using his brain, he should at least choose the more

interesting option.

Gilliam continued pretending to be drunk and spat at the soldier who was trying to tie him up. When the soldier flinched, he laughed out loud. Even when he caught a hard blow to the stomach, he didn't feel a thing.

Without wasting any time, Natokk's subordinates went to the barracks of the Fifth Army Corps where Orba was. When they kicked down the door, he was sitting up in bed.

He wore his mask.

But he had not armed himself with a sword or a gun. What he had in his hands was a book.

"What business do you have with me in the middle of the night?" Orba asked. It was impossible to tell what his expression was but through the mask his eyes glittered sharply.

For a moment, the brawny Zerdian soldiers held their breath. Although he had no weapon nearby, they had the chilling feeling that any moment now he would grab them with his bare hands.

At that moment, Orba's anger was certainly boundless. It had been that way since he had heard the gunshot, but it was not aimed at them.

One of the soldiers came back to his senses.

"I am very sorry but I would ask you to come with us. If there are any personal belongings you need to take, please prepare them at once."

The soldiers were armed with bayonets but they did not point them towards him.

"There's nothing," Orba shrugged. "I don't need anything. I'll follow you. Oh, but..."

"But?"

His eyes glinted dangerously in the dark and for a moment, the soldiers once more held their breath. But what Orba said was —

“Don’t touch my mask. It was a present from Princess Esmena. No one is to lay a single finger on it.”

PART 2

North of Helio, at a distance that could be covered in about two and half days by a galloping horse, there was a comparatively large village. It was prosperous mainly from trade with the nomads. It was said that since the western Lake Kurán had been deemed holy, the ancestors of the inhabitants had cleared space for the village with the intention of protecting that sacred ground.

The meeting between Ax and the elders from the main clans would be held at a location a dozen or so kilometres east of the village.

The village itself had suddenly become animated thanks to Ax and the great crowd of people which had spontaneously amassed around him.

Everywhere he passed through on the way there, Ax had been welcomed. Whenever he approached a town or a village, droves of people crowded on either side of the highway to catch a glimpse of him. His name was called out repeatedly. The eyes turned towards him were the eyes of those gazing at a matchless king.

Atop his horse, Ax was at the summit of his triumph. He deeply felt that the power of the Bazgan House had finally been restored, and by none other than himself at that.

I need to give thanks to Garda – He even thought fleetingly.

Because that sorcerer had run rampant, becoming a common ‘enemy’ for the west, it had become fertile ground for a hero such as himself to step forward and demonstrate his might.

Even in myths and legends, vicious ‘enemies’ only exist to make the hero work hard and look good after all. Hmm, this might become the founding tale of the rebirth of Zer Tauran.

Ax Bazgan happily indulged in childish fantasies.

In this village too a welcome banquet was going to be held forthwith. All the notable villagers came up to greet him one after another.

Moreover, it appeared that a number of youths from this village had joined the punitive force against Garda. Ax personally praised the achievements of one who had

survived and become a minor hero in the village. The youth's cheeks flushed and his feverishly ardent eyes became blurred.

If, right then and there, Ax had ordered "Die for me", he might well have slit his own throat with his sword. It was no wonder that, in a way, Ravan Dol was warier of Ax's fame than of the enemy, but Ax himself saw the youth's ecstasy as heart-warming.

In the house of the village chief, a dance that was a specialty of Tauran was struck up. Although, as this was a rural part of Tauran, neither the appearance nor the gyrations of the dancing girls were particularly refined.

I miss Jaina's dancing.

While outwardly displaying satisfaction, Ax inwardly thought about his wife, who was a former dancer.

The melody from the flutes changed and the dancing girls were replaced by another group. Most of them did nothing to overturn Ax's impression, but there was one beauty who caught his eye.

Oh, that's rare for the countryside.

Her bearing was light and, from her fluttering hair to the tip of her toes, her movements were charming.

As Ax was greatly pleased with her, after the group dance was over, he had the beauty stay back and dance before him.

He continued to drink. Unusually for him, he became drunk.

Not surprising.

Even though Ax had confidence in his resistance to alcohol and in his stamina, he had left Taúlia to defeat Garda and after that there had been a succession of meetings in Eimen. Then, with no time to rest, he had extended his trip all the way to here. It felt good to know that from here on he would be praised as the west's greatest hero, but on the other hand, having every single one of his actions attract attention was a little wearing on the nerves.

The alcohol and the beauty's dance seemed to seep into his body.

The night grew late and Ax invited the beauty to the room that would serve as his lodgings.

Ax was full of vigour, yet after having made Jaina his wife, there had been no rumours of his having any love affairs. Nor had he taken a concubine.

While feeling surprised at himself, he asked –

“You. Your name is?”

She paused for a moment as she poured alcohol.

“I am called Tahī.”

Her eyes shining a brilliant dark black by the light of the lamp, the beauty gave her name.

Ax made Tahī dance once again.

As he watched while she danced alone, wearing the dim, dusky light like a garment; Ax felt as though he were slipping through the boundary of dreams.

Through a seamlessly natural flow, they were in bed together.

Even then, Ax was in a dreamlike trance. Tahī’s ardent skin, soft lips, and supple limbs became the chains that robbed Ax’s mind and body of freedom. It was a strangely comfortable feeling. From somewhere other than his own nature, he seemed to be overflowing with a desire to leave his everything to another person and to simply fall asleep.

And so, when Tahī straddled his chest as though riding a horse, with a dagger gleaming in her hand, it was as though he were watching an act from a stage play and he was unable to grasp that his life was in danger.



Tahī's somewhat thick lips parted in a smile and she swept the blade towards Ax's breast in a rush of wind.

At that instant, a rough noise rose from outside the lodgings.

A sound like the reverberation of a thousand army boots or like lightning had just fallen nearby could be heard. It was the repeated roaring of dragons.

The invisible chain was torn away from Ax's body and mind.

"You fucking...!"

He stretched out his hand for a sword but there wasn't even the pillow which should have been there.

To be tricked by a woman's wiles.

While Ax burned with regret, Tahī clicked her tongue. However, she immediately put her blade into a rough fighting stance and thrust it forward. Ax dodged twice but his body was sluggish. Even his brain felt dull, as though some foreign substance had gotten inside it.

"Anyone. Someone, get in here."

He had meant to shout but only a voice as hoarse as an old man's leaked out.

When Tahī leapt a third time, Ax tripped over his own feet and fell.

For the man who was praised everywhere as the ruler of the west to have his life cut short after having fallen into the clutches of a woman he had invited to his bedroom...

As Ax was thinking that, and just as the blade was about to plunge straight into his heart, a dragon was heard howling again.

"Why are there dragons here!"

It wasn't Tahī who yelled but the soldiers outside the lodgings.

"Drive them away!"

“Bastard, what are you doing here – Uwah!”

Immediately after, the bedroom door opened and what appeared was neither brawny soldiers nor a new assassin beckoned by Tahī but, at a glance, a very ordinary, slightly-built middle-aged man.

As Ax, Tahī, and the soldiers who were racing in behind stared in surprise and confusion, the middle-aged man nodded to himself in satisfaction.

“It’s a case of being called by the lingering scent of Garda. As expected.”

“You are the one who hindered me?” Tahī spat out bitterly. Her expression warped into one of hatred and she looked like a completely different person from the one who had danced in front of Ax.

“Not me. My cute children.” He wore the same smile as when he performed magic tricks for the youngsters. Ax wasn’t familiar with him, but this man was the merchant who walked along with dragons. “The voices of those children disturb ether. Come and let yourself be tied up quietly. You will not be moving freely anymore.”

“You’re taking me, Tahī, too lightly.”

So saying, Tahī kicked at the floor. With one bound, she was right before the merchant. The roar of dragons sounded three times. They had apparently been left in the garden.

Tahī’s body shook and lurched over.

As if by magic, the merchant produced a long rope from his breast and casually threw it. One of the tricks he showed off in public was to use a lasso to catch the neck of a dragon which was far away; but this time, it twined unerringly around Tahī’s neck and, coiling repeatedly around her sensual limbs, it prevented her from moving.

It was a skilful ability. However –

“Ngh!”

As soon as Tahī made a sound, the ropes were cut apart in mid-air then that supple body leapt higher and higher. Landing behind the merchant, she then slipped past the side of the dumbfounded soldiers and vanished from sight.

“Oh,” turning around towards the direction she had darted off in, the merchant spoke without either a smile nor a sigh. “That’s a surprise. If she had been a normal sorcerer, she would not have been able to use a single magic trick after the ether had been disturbed. It might be that this isn’t unrelated to us.”

Having finally snapped back to themselves, the soldiers surrounded the merchant on either side.

“B-Bastard!”

“Don’t move!”

“Wait,” Ax held them back with a wave of his hand.

Normally he would be roaring angrily at the soldiers for so easily allowing a suspicious person to come near him; but in this case, he himself had invited a viper to his bedroom. His head was still dull and he pressed a hand against it.

“Did you say Garda? That woman, who is she? And you?”

“You really should be careful, Sir Ax Bazgan.” As though ignoring Ax’s question, the merchant bobbed his head, still wrapped in the turban with feathers stuck in it. That too was a gesture that resembled those of a conjurer before a spectator.

“It would seem that the sorcerers can’t ignore you either. Although we cannot carelessly interfere in the west. If we were to lose Sir Ax now, it would be a hard blow for us. Although that is only now, at this moment, and I cannot promise that it will still be the same in a year’s time, or even tomorrow.”

“Sorcerers, is it. Then that woman really is a survivor from Garda’s subordinates.”

“That is half right and half wrong. Since Garda has not been destroyed.”

“What!”

“Oops, and I was given such strict orders not to give too much unnecessary information. People have their path to follow and evil spirits have theirs. It is said that having the two domains penetrate too far into one another throws even the golden mean of fate into disarray. With that, I’ll be taking my leave Sir Ax. Ruler of the west.”

“Wait!”

This time Ax was about to give orders to the soldiers to seize the man. But there was something strange about the hand he lifted. It felt as though the governor-general of Taúlia had once again fallen into a magic snare.

“You need only remember this,” the merchant’s voice was already fading away yet it was still accompanied by a booming reverberation. “You asked me who I am, but my own name has no significance. However, I come from the Barbaroi village. For now, remember only this.”

Ax abruptly looked around, but there were only the soldiers, who looked as though they too had only just come back to themselves, and the merchant’s figure had disappeared.

He mobilised a great many soldiers and had them search the surrounding area; but the middle-aged man, the three unusual dragons that he had with him, and, of course, the dancer who called herself Tahī, were not to be found.

Soon, the sun began to rise. Ax was bathed in the light that was shining brilliantly over the mountain ridge and, as the shadows were driven away, he began to wonder if that night’s happenings hadn’t all been illusions.

However –

Garda and... Barbaroi.

Ax tightly grasped the war fan that he carried closely on him. At this point, Garda’s name needed no explanation. As for Barbaroi, it was the name of a village said to be located around the sacred ground of Kurán. According to legend, the Ryuujin, the original inhabitants of the planet who had once been displaced by mankind, still lived in that land.

He was suddenly seized with the thought that there might be an as yet unknown link between the rampage of the sorcerer who called himself Garda and Mephius’ sudden invasion.

“Hmph,” Ax gave a loud snort. “Whatever plots may lie beneath the surface of this world, they are all simply preparations to allow me, Ax, to govern the whole of the western lands. Just as Garda himself was. I cannot die until the power of the Bazgan

House shines upon the entirety of this western wilderness. That is the only thing which is certain. That is the only thing I need pray for.”

The next thing Ax thought was –

It's a good thing Ravan isn't here.

There could be no greater disgrace than to be killed by a woman he had called over himself. Being scolded directly was fine but with Ravan, he would definitely be in for relentless and unending sarcasm.

At the same time, when he thought that *if Ravan had been here – I wouldn't have gotten into that situation in the first place* – Ax felt uncomfortable for a reason other than having had his life targeted.

PART 3

Coming home from picking wild plants, Rone saw a throng of people around his house and smiled wryly. Holding that feeling back however, he shouted loudly –

“Hey!”

The crowd scattered at once, its members running off in different directions. Most of them were teenage boys.

“It’s the Mephian kidnapper,” one of them shouted jeeringly.

Thereupon, another took up, “He’s kidnapped someone from the mountains again.”

“Next time, find a good bride for our brother, ‘kay!”

The tanned youths were making a racket partly to hide their embarrassment. It wasn’t surprising. The border village was relatively large but even so the population didn’t reach a thousand. Around it, only the mountains and the wilderness stretched out and the boys were starved for excitement.

But Rone liked it. It had not yet been three months since they had arrived in this village which lay west of the River Yunos. In other words, even though they were Mephian, the Tauran villagers had warmly welcomed them. At first, his wife had missed life in the city but now she had made friends with women of her age and her figure as she tilled the fields had gradually become a familiar sight.

“The beans I planted are finally hard enough to crush,” she had said not long ago, proudly showing them off to Rone.

He was both surprised and moved that his wife, who was use to a prosperous lifestyle, was so resolute. Although life wasn’t easy, it was secure.

What’s left...

Rone’s remaining worry was about his daughter. Because there had been a complete upheaval of their environment half a year ago, Rone thought of things from their life before as distant; but for his daughter, that one nightmarish day still felt like it was yesterday. She wasn’t able to adapt as flexibly as his wife had.

On this occasion, Rone had encountered a strange continuity.

It was the incident that had the children hooting “kidnapper”. About half a month earlier, as he was on his way back from his daily task of gathering wild plants, he had suddenly noticed a path to the side that he hadn’t taken before. He had been starting to become familiar with the surroundings. Curiosity overcame him and he turned his feet in that direction.

The harvest was poor. He found neither edible plants nor any kind of substitute for them. Just as Rone was about to turn back home, he had spotted the figure of person who had collapsed looking as though they were leaning against a tree.

The man was covered in wounds all over. There seemed to have been some kind of medical care performed but the skin showing through the crude bandaging was burned and darkish with solidified blood stuck to his entire face. His clothes were in shreds.

He had wondered if maybe he had been caught stealing in a town somewhere and, having been chased out, had been reduced to becoming a tramp.

The man was still breathing. Rone had hesitated for a moment but, as someone who had been chased away from the place where they had been born and raised, he resembled him in a way. Lifting the man onto his shoulders, he had returned to the village.

They had shared their meagre provisions, called the elderly man who was the only one in the village to have any medical knowledge, and had treated his wounds. Although in effect, that had only meant applying medicine made from squeezing herbs and replacing his bandages with new ones.

But although the man had returned to his senses, he must have had a terrifying experience; he remained lying all day long and, even now, barely spoke. He appeared to have nightmares every night. In these past few days, however, he seemed to have regained some presence of mind; his wariness had considerably decreased towards Rone and his family, and he mumbled words of gratitude when they brought him his food.

Whatever the case, Rone had been relieved when that happened.

“This is...” Rone had muttered unconsciously just yesterday morning as his feet came

to a stop along the mountain path.

Less than a kilometre from where the man had been, he came across another person who had collapsed.

This time, it was a woman. Moreover, a girl still only fourteen or fifteen years old. Her condition wasn't as awful as the man's had been but she was bleeding from the head and her skin had turned ashen.

There were two more points that were strange. The girl was wearing what was evidently a flight suit for riding an airship, and also, she was probably neither Zerdian nor Mephian.

Rone thought it suspicious, but he couldn't ignore the situation this time either, so in the end he had brought the girl back to the village.

"You're a man who is good at picking people up," the village chief had said, half in amazement, half in exasperation.

As a matter of course, the girl became the talk of the village. As with the man, Rone's guess was that she had fallen into vagrancy or slavery; but whatever the case, she was a young girl. All sorts of rumours sprang up. There were stories that she was a woman from another country who had fled because some foreign king was going to force her to become his mistress, or that she was a princess from a coastal country who had been carried here by the current after the ship she was travelling on was shipwrecked.

The beautiful girl who had collapsed in the mountains had especially stirred up the interest of the youths and they were often found surrounding Rone's home, in the hopes of being able to peer inside the house.

While he was sending them away, the doctor had once again provided his care.

"There is nothing to worry about," the doctor had nodded when he had left the girl who was sleeping in bed. "The head injury is nothing too serious. She has been weakened after using up a lot of her strength but she should recover considerably with two or three days rest and proper meals."

"I see."

"Still..."

“Still?”

Nothing, the old man shook his head and left the house. Rone could easily guess what was on the doctor’s mind. The man was one thing but with the girl... there were too many mysteries. The doctor was probably worried about inviting trouble to the village.

It was situated not far from the border with Mephius and they had just heard that there had been an armed skirmish.

That was another reason why the youths seemed more impetuous than usual.

The situation is on the verge of military action again.

Amidst all this Rone uneasily wondered, even though she was just one girl, if her enigmatic presence was a good thing for the village.

He entered the house just as his daughter was coming out of the guest room in which the girl had been laid.

“And that child?”

“She has woken up. I’m just preparing breakfast with mother, so wait a bit, Father.”

Oh – Rone’s eyes opened a little wide as his daughter seemed to have changed slightly. When he had brought the man in, she had not dropped her fear and wariness but, no doubt feeling pity for a girl younger than her, she was starting to be actively involved in looking after her.

“Say,” she spoke while tying on her apron, “don’t ask that girl too many questions. She looked like she didn’t want to talk about herself.”

“Yeah.”

“A bit like us...”

Cutting off her words, his daughter started preparing the meal. Rone understood what she wanted to say.

They were holding secrets.

Rone Jayce.

Half a year earlier, he had been a regular soldier in the imperial capital, Solon. Moreover, he had been part of Emperor Guhl Mephius' Imperial Guards.

His daughter's name was Layla. Thanks to the influence of her father the imperial guard, she had grown up without lacking for anything; at around the time she was to turn eighteen, she had married a man of the same age and from a similar military background.

Layla's happiness should have been at its peak, but was suddenly taken from her; and the one who caused her downfall, as well as the rest of Rone's family, was Gil Mephius, the very son of the emperor whom Rone had sworn to protect.

Gil proclaimed his "Right to the first night", something which the imperial family had never once exercised, and had forcibly pressed Layla to sleep with him. Not only that, but the one made to stand guard at the cheap inn he brought her to was her own father, Rone.

For Rone, it was like something from a nightmare.

He had broken through the door to hold back Prince Gil and stop that barbarity. Of course, he knew that doing so would cause his own ruin. What came next still clung to his eardrums –

A gunshot

As the sound of that shot echoed in his mind, Rone shivered. They had become entangled, Rone had ended up pulling the trigger and Gil – the successor to the throne of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius – had sunk to the filthy wooden floor, a silent corpse in a pool of blood.

Hugging his sobbing daughter, Rone had resigned himself to death. He believed that as long as he could protect his family, it didn't matter if he was torn limb from limb, or made to fight a hundred gladiators, or eaten alive by dragons.

Besides, the first to come rushing to the scene had been a leading noble called Fedom Aulin. There was no longer any hope of escaping.

But then, the situation had veered off in a strange direction.

“The prince is still breathing. What happened here is a disgrace for the imperial family of Mephius. Do not speak of it to anyone. Instead, if you leave everything to me, your family will not have to worry about a thing.” Fedom had said.

His words were irrational and coercive, but things had turned out as he had said; no pursuers were sent from the castle after Rone’s family, nor had the death of Crown Prince Gil been publicly announced. Not only that but, very shortly afterwards, Gil Mephius, who should have been dead, had gone to Seirin Valley to hold the wedding ceremony with a princess from the neighbouring country of Garbera.

Rone and his family has left the capital before the stories of Gil’s heroic accomplishments had spread throughout Solon. They had feared for their safety. It did not take any deep thought to realise that it reeked of a national conspiracy.

They also had the intention of escaping any investigation since many of the guests invited to the wedding knew that Gil had invoked the right to the first night. A short while before that, the family of Layla’s marriage partner had indirectly suggested that the engagement be annulled.

They had wandered from place to place in Mephius and had once been on the verge of settling in a village not far from Apta.

However, he heard a rumour that Gil Mephius would arrive as lord protector of Apta. He did not want that name to reach his daughter’s ears. Furthermore, he had received a letter from a man that he had known well in a village where they had previously stayed for about a month. It stated that a man, who claimed to be one of his acquaintances from Solon, had come by to visit him, however Rone did not know him.

Was he sent by Fedom?

Rone had shuddered, turning pale. To be looking for him after so much time, he wondered whether he wasn’t trying to kill him in order to seal his lips.

Rone had immediately gathered up their belongings and had set off with his wife and child. They had crossed the border by taking a mountain path at the north of the Belgana Summits. For ten days they travelled south. It was a journey to a new land.

His wife and child had been beginning to show fatigue when, by chance, they had arrived at this village. Naturally, it was a Zerdian settlement but, at the time, the mood towards Mephians had been friendly. This was because none other than Gil Mephius

had effected a reconciliation with Taúlia. Rone had mixed feelings about it but, at any rate, the villagers had received the foreign travellers without being guarded.

A few days into their stay, upon learning that Rone and his family had no particular destination, the village chief had offered them a house and field.

From the time they had left Solon, his daughter, Layla, had been in the depths of despair; she had been brooding so much that her father worried if they took their eyes off her, she might end her own life. However, having been driven to end their travels at life in this village, little by little she had started to show signs of recovery.

But then roughly two months earlier, completely unexpected – and, it should perhaps be said, very belated – news had reached the village.

The report of Prince Gil's death.

Rone Jayce had a strange sense of shock but, whatever had happened, he had left everything to Fedom and had fled from Solon. He didn't dwell over it anymore than necessary, however when Layla heard about it, she closed herself off just as she had before. Perhaps it was because, whether she wanted to or not, it had made her think back to that time or perhaps it was because she had been left with a strange feeling of loss when the one she bitterly resented had suddenly died.

Is it going to take a long time again? Rone had been wondering uneasily, but then Layla had superimposed her circumstances and those of that girl's; it was no wonder that she had become sympathetic towards her.

"I'll go and talk with her a little," Rone said to Layla. "It's alright, I'll just have a chat."

"Be careful now."

"Having raised a daughter, I can say this with confidence: I do have a minimum of delicacy."

Is that so – Layla smiled in spite of herself.

When he opened the door, the girl was looking out of the window from the bed. A hedge could be seen. It was from there that the crowd of youths earlier had desperately been gathering.

“Was it noisy?” Rone asked as gently as possible.

The girl turned her gaze towards him. There were bandages wrapped around her head but she had no other obvious injuries. Looking at her anew, she was a fair-skinned girl with well-proportioned features. The slightly too-large clothes covering her body were ones he remembered Layla wearing before. Despite the fact they were somewhat ill-fitting, her still figure on the bed, bathed in the brilliant sunshine coming in from the window, looked to Rone like an image from a scroll.

“You are Layla’s father,” the girl said in a clear voice. “Thank you for saving me.”

“No, no, I just happened to be passing through.”

Rone continued to talk about nothing in particular as he pretended to tidy this and that in the guestroom. Her face looked a little tired but she didn’t seem to be experiencing any after-effects from her injury. Just as the doctor had said, she had simply been completely exhausted.

“You haven’t asked me anything.”

“I don’t mind waiting until you feel like talking. This is an easy-going village and the people who live here move unhurriedly with time and nature.”

The girl lowered her eyes slightly and seemed, with that one change in expression, to express gratitude.

“My daughter will be bringing something to eat later. She is also an easy-going girl. Since she doesn’t have many friends of the same age in the village, it would be a big help if you could become someone she can talk with.”

“Of course,” the girl smiled.

After he left the room, Rone gazed at the door he had just shut as though trying see through to the other side.

Yep, looks like she is no ordinary lass.

Rone had served as an Imperial Guard in the capital city of Solon. He was acquainted with many sorts of people; to say nothing of the emperor, there were numerous nobles, soldiers, scholars, and wealthy merchants.

That lass has “understanding”, thought Rone.

When facing a person for the first time in an unknown land, with what kind of attitude should one receive them, what kind of words should one choose? What Rone meant by “understanding” were the manners of those belonging to the highest classes.

I should keep an eye on her for now.

And then, if he turned out to be correct, he wanted to gather information about the skirmish between the west and Mephius. There might be some relation.

If possible, Rone wanted to protect the injured man and the girl.

But their existence might be a threat to his family.

If the lives picked up with these hands, like this...

The sound of a gunshot echoed in his mind once more.

After Rone had left the guestroom, the girl gazed out of the window again.

Platinum hair glittered as the morning light washed over it. It goes without saying that she was Garbera’s third princess, Vileena Owell.

After wandering lost on the mountain path and finally collapsing, she had been found by Rone.

In truth, there had been a lot that she had wanted to ask him. How did the battle between Mephius and Taúlia end? Were there any noticeable movements from either camp? Whether or not it was known that she, the royal princess, had gone missing - or put otherwise, whether or not Mephius or Garbera had issued an official statement.

But if her identity was revealed, Rone might notify Apta immediately; and afterwards she would clearly be sent back to Mephius’ capital, Solon, or to Garbera.

And then...

Resolving herself to bearing the disgrace, flying out of Apta, and bringing secret information to Taúlia would lose all meaning.

Vileena tightly gripped the edge of the blanket.

One way or another, she wanted to stop the war between Mephius and the west. Absorbed in that thought, she had even gotten Krau and Hou Ran involved and had jumped into an airship. The former Imperial Guards who had served the prince were being held restrained in Apta. Emperor Guhl Mephius seemed to want to accuse Taúlia of assassinating the prince as an excuse to attack the western lands. As such, they who had testified to General Oubary's crime were a hindrance. If things were left as they were, Gowen and Hou Ran might be executed for conspiring with the west and taking part in the prince's assassination.

In that situation, she had not wanted to escape somewhere safe by herself. But that said, what could her tiny self do on her own? In fact, she had been wounded after having tried to stop the war.

Even though I was born into the royal family...

She had been saved by the kindness of strangers.

She had no influence in this land where nobody knew her. In fact, what would have happened to her if Rone hadn't by chance been passing by? A starving wolf was not likely to leave her alone because she announced that "I am a princess of Garbera". Hunger was unbearable for royalty. Thrown out into the night, she truly had not been able to do a thing, and would have quietly stopped breathing.

She thought of how she had cried miserably at her own powerlessness.

The rights, the duties, and the power of the royal family, what are they really?

"The royal family has a duty to devote themselves to the country's affairs."

Those were the words that her grandfather had taught her in the past. And those were the words that she herself had spoken to Mephius' crown prince in the past.

At that time, had she truly believed that?

Now that the concept was once again thrust before her, Vileena's thoughts were

paralyzed.

Vileena's hand left the blanket and touched the medallion hanging at her neck.

At that moment, the door opened again and Layla appeared. On her tray was bread and a meaty soup.

"Is that some kind of amulet?" Layla asked. Her bright voice and expression must have been inherited from her father, as her smile was a lot like his.

She placed the tray near the pillow on the bed.

"Or is it a present from your lover?"

"No," thinking that she might be suspected of hiding something, Vileena showed Layla the reverse side which did not depict Garbera's national flag. "It was a present from me."

"Eh? Then – it was rejected?"

Vileena laughed at her outspokenness. Layla looked embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, that was rude."

"Not at all. But... it might be something like that."

"A man who would behave like that after receiving a present from a girl as cute as you is best forgotten fast. He definitely likes men. Do you know the Badyne faith? Apparently, the believers practice those kind of customs and..."

After getting that far, Layla leaned far out of the window.

"Hey!" She shouted.

Boys had begun to turn up at the hedge again. *Waah* – their voices sounded panicked, or perhaps over-excited.

"Ah!" Layla exclaimed in an oddly high-pitched voice. "Isn't that Lennus from next door? And he even gave me flowers before, the philanderer!"

Despite herself, Vileena smiled again.

The steam wafting up from the soup was slightly warm.

CHAPTER 4

SUBMERGED

PART 1

Despite being recognised within the kingdom of Garbera as a prominent noble family, malicious whispers often referred to the Kotjun House as the “Moneylending House”. The reason for that was related to their origins.

Just three reigns ago, they were, so to speak, miners whose main occupation was to excavate dragonbone; and although they possessed some wealth, their standing was merely that of a powerful local clan. Their prosperity had improved dramatically after they had discovered and mined a dragonbone lode lying in Garbera’s northern mountains; they and had then immediately tied themselves in a commercial agreement with the Garberan king of three reigns ago, who had been zealous about carrying out the refining of dragonbone into weightless metal.

Although the relationship between the Kotjun House and the royal household remained favourable, they were kept at arm’s length. Later, when the previous king, Jeorg, had wished to strengthen the air force corps even further, he had thought to have them be directly employed as retainers to the king. The condition that they stipulated, at the time, was that the Kotjun House would obtain forty percent of the wealth derived from the dragonbone deposits that they themselves discovered and developed.

Jeorg Owell had agreed to it.

Garbera was a country which had originally been built by gathering together powerful regional families, however, many of these families had died out or been ruined during the conflicts in each area. It was said that the Kotjun House found amongst them a family with the same name and had bought their pedigree for a high price.

Therefore, although the Kotjun House was known by those within Garbera to have been miners in the past, they officially claimed that going even further back in history, they had been a powerful regional family of noble standing.

They had amassed a greater fortune than anyone else in Garbera – possibly greater even than the king himself – and by lending that money to aristocrats and military commanders, they had accrued even more wealth and influence.

There were many, among those who were close to the king, who did not look kindly on their existence. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly the presence of the Kotjun House that had allowed Jeorg, the previous king, to strike down the noble houses, which had been on the verge of seceding from the royal family, and to take back the lands which had been snatched away by Mephius and Ende.

Furthermore, it was a fact acknowledged by all, that it was thanks to the funds and dragonbone provided by the Kotjun House that Garbera currently boasted a powerful air force which allowed it to remain on equal footing with those two countries.

Rinoa Kotjun, a daughter of the Kotjun family, had just turned seventeen and, like generations of the heads of her house, she was known to love parties. She would come up with some pretext or another, then hold a grand party at their mansion in the capital, Phozon. It was said that Rinoa spent her days doing nothing but writing party invitations to leading aristocrats, military commanders, and merchants.

That evening as well, the mansion's hall and gardens had been thrown open to host a banquet. Food and drink ordered from all over, rare and expensive items included, were liberally served; while in the hall and far above it, entertainers from both inside and outside of Garbera basked in applause as they demonstrated their first-rate skills.

Just now, a group of boys had played the flute while standing on their hands.

Splendid – thought Zenon Owell, but his heart was unmoved. It was not that he was bad with glamorous surroundings, but a certain piece of news received a few days earlier had thrown that heart into gloom.

He was aware that he had been attracting attention since earlier. This was only the second time that he had attended a party given by the Kotjun family. At the centre of numerous gazes that were questioning what was going on, Zenon smiled faintly and wore an expression that said that he was enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart.

There seemed to be more merchants than nobles present at the party. One of the purposes of Rinoa's parties was to summon traders from all over Garbera and exchange information. The Kotjun family was quite open about it. And because they

were so upfront, they avoided having the image of secretly moving behind the scenes to make money.

They looked like merchants acting like merchants.

“Lord Zenon,” a voice called out from behind him. When he turned around, it was Rinoa Kotjun.

“Why, Miss Rinoa,” his smile deepened.

When invited to a party by the Kotjun family, the first thing that any guest worried about was how they should greet the daughter of the head of the house, Rinoa, when she stood before them.

The clothes she wore were of course gorgeous. Although its base was black, her dress was inlaid with bright colours that prevented it from looking too mature, or from becoming too overpoweringly dark. Violet velvet ribbons decorated her hair and jewels sparkled on two of her fingers.

Well, it's safest to praise her clothes and accessories – the malicious and sharp-tongued would say.

At Garbera's royal court, Rinoa Kotjun's name was all but synonymous for 'a plain woman'. Those extolled as 'beauties' in Garbera had round cheeks brushed with rouge, large eyes, and blond hair. Therefore women typically applied makeup to make their eyes look big, but Rinoa had narrow upturned eyes and a thin face that seemed to taper to the point of her sharp chin.

As a matter of fact, her looks were not as bad as gossip claimed, but as she was a young lady who was far from typical, quite a few things were said, half out of familiarity, half out of jealousy, about her appearance and personality.

“It was good of you to come. Even though I wrote an invitation for you, Lord Zenon, I was quite resigned for it to be a waste of time again.”

Receiving a wine cup held out by the party sponsor herself, Zenon drained the contents in one gulp.

“You see, I realized that I had forgotten to express my gratitude.”

“Your gratitude?”

Zenon explained that when he had previously been stationed at Zaim, the Kotjun House’s engineering team had prepared a state-of-the-art ship for his Order of the Tiger.

“Oh yes, there was that, wasn’t there? But up until now you have frequently done us the honour of receiving such things, so why are you only acting differently this time?”

“Ah, that, I... was thinking that I have not been very obliging towards your House.”

“Lord Zenon, you are esteemed for your chivalrous spirit. The likes of the Moneylending House does not fit the Garbera of your ideals, is that not right?”

Rinoa said such a thing publicly. Zenon gave a sour look but strangely, when it was Rinoa saying it, he didn’t feel any sarcasm or mockery from the words. It was probably because both her expression and her tone were bright. There was not a single gloomy person in the Kotjun family.

“Speaking of acting differently, these days, you seem to be close to Sir Salzantes.”

“Oh, you have heard about that, Miss Rinoa?”

“Even if I have, there was no one more surprised than I was, as I had supposed the relationship between the two of you to be like oil and water.”

“It was not anything that extreme. You could simply say that we had a few misunderstandings up until now.”

At Rinoa’s invitation, Zenon headed towards a chair in a recess of the hall. In the nearby garden, young men and women could be seen dancing in a ring.

“In truth, I had thought that you would also have invited Noue.”

“I have never once sent that gentleman an invitation. Of course, if Your Highness were to say that you wanted him to accompany you, I would not refuse that request,” Rinoa spoke flatly, a smile still on her face. “Simply imagining drinking tea opposite that person whose thoughts I cannot guess makes me shiver. Is there a single enjoyable thing about associating with that gentleman?”

“You are quite unusual,” when facing this woman, Zenon had plenty of opportunities to smile wryly. “Noue is a favourite of the women at Court. Well, because of that he often also earns their antipathy.”

“Oh, in that sense I am fine. Since I am not beautiful enough to meet his standards, right?”

He couldn't exactly answer “Right”.

Seeing Zenon struggle to keep a neutral expression, Rinoa laughed lightly.

“Be it with Sir Salzantes or with your doing us the honour of coming here, you have certainly changed, Your Highness.”

“Do you think so? Hmm, one's own self is difficult to understand.”

Zenon pretended to use the palm of his hand as a mirror and to inspect his face from various angles. It was a smooth countermeasure but –

“If I were a gossipmonger, I might say that because you fell into a difficult position in Ende, you lost your chivalrous spirit and became a coward, Lord Zenon.” Rinoa said that with a smile too. Zenon almost had an involuntary coughing fit.

“But this is just nonsense spoken by an upstart miner,” while deprecating herself, Rinoa would calmly talk on dangerous topics. For example, she afterwards changed the subject and commented on his older brother, Razetta, in other words, on the person who was first in line for the throne.

“That gentleman is so easy-going, and moreover he seems to have so much free time every day, that my heart warms at the sight of him.”

Prince Razetta served as the commander of the Knights of the Order of the White Heron, the elite guards to the royal family. It was an important role which doubled as guarding the royal capital, but Rinoa's evaluation seemed to be that “He is neglecting his work.”

One of the reasons why Zenon was bad at handling Rinoa was because he felt exactly as though his own nature were being tested. The impression she gave was that she enjoyed pushing towards a confrontation.

“My brother is a serious person. Whatever the task, he will put all his energy into accomplishing it.”

“Yes, indeed. Lord Razetta can surely not be a bad person. For example... if he was at the party, after seeing I had dressed up like this, and so as not to wound my feelings, that gentleman would have, by this time, skilfully managed to think of a plausible compliment.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“We were talking about how Lord Razetta is a virtuous person. Were we not?”

The people in the hall were obliquely watching the conversation between the two. Despite knowing that, Rinoa deliberately and openly brought her lips near his ear.

“It seems like everyone here can’t help but be interested in you, Your Highness. Although that may also be because of the rumour about Lady Vileena.”

“That? It’s rubbish.”

Because he had guessed that the topic would come up, Zenon’s expression did not change.

The information had reached Garbera that Mephius had advanced its army to Taúlia. It was apparently in retaliation for them having assassinated the prince. While that was one thing, there was a rumour which the people of Gabera could not ignore.

Princess Vileena had warned Taúlia and since then, she was being kept under restriction within Mephius.

That news had only arrived three days earlier.

If this is true – Noue had said when Zenon invited him to his chambers – Guhl is probably looking to see how Garbera will react by deliberately spreading the rumour, and at the same time he is stressing that it will not be his fault if something unfortunate were to happen to the princess.

Of course, Zenon being Zenon, he was revolted by the way Emperor Guhl had used Prince Gil Mephius’ death as an excuse to invade Taúlia. He had no difficulty imagining that, just like him, his little sister had been fiercely angry; only she was impetuous

enough to actually inform Taúlia and thwart a surprise attack.

That's my little sister, who cannot tell a lie.

If he was still the same Zenon as before, he very well might have marched into Mephius, sword in hand, to take his sister back. No, even now he had the spirit to do so. But at the same time, he believed that– *my little sister would not want Garbera and Mephius to cross swords.*

If she had carried information to Taúlia, it had been because her own principles could not stand for it, and she had no choice but to try and stop the war, even if it meant opposing her home country.

“Indeed, it is rubbish,” said Rinoa. “However, there are those who do not think so... like that gentleman over there.”

She pointed to a man who was standing more or less in the centre of the hall. Zenon turned his gaze that way and for a moment, a complicated expression seemed to cross his face.

Salamand Fogel, the vice-commander of the Knights of the Order of the Badger. A man with a truly fierce physique.

They had stood several times on the same battlefield. At twenty-eight, his age was virtually the same as Zenon's. He was a daring and resolute man, whose character did not betray the impression given by his square and prominent jaw. There should have been no denying that they were comrade-in-arms, who had challenged death together, except that the man had been an ardent admirer of Ryucown's.

When the royal family had been considering bringing the ten-year war to an end by marrying Vileena and Gil – or rather, when rumours of that fact had started to spread throughout Phozon – there had been many officers and soldiers who were unhappy with it. As a matter of fact, Zenon had been too; but as he was also a member of the royal family, and moreover knew the extent of their army's exhaustion, he had finally agreed to his father's decision.

At that time, after being wounded by the Mephian army, Salamand Fogel had been undergoing medical treatment at his home. Already feeling despondent because of that, and greatly dissatisfied with the royal family's decision, he had gotten drunk one evening and sung an improvised song, the meaning of which was that “a true knight

like Sir Ryuicorn deserves the throne of Garbera". His companions having informed on him, he had even been thrown into jail for a while.

The commander of the Order of the Badger had desperately pleaded in his favour, and Salamand had been released, but in the meanwhile there had been Ryuicorn's uprising and its suppression by Mephius' army.

It was said that despite having only just regained his freedom, Salamand had wept bitterly, not caring that anyone saw him.

"I too wanted to remain true to knighthood with Sir Ryuicorn. Garbera's chivalry has perished with him."

Zenon remembered how he had fiercely ground his teeth when he had heard about those words. He himself strived to be a model of chivalry in all he said and did. Caught between his inability to forgive Ryuicorn for betraying his country, and his own attempts to live up to those chivalric ideals, Zenon's heart had been shaken.

Rinoa continued to whisper, "without paying attention to anyone, that gentleman has been spreading the rumour that Lady Vileena's actions are based on faith in Garbera. And that we should seize this opportunity to rescue the princess from that perfidious Mephius."

Zenon felt that he could understand now why Rinoa had invited him here. And, just as he had imagined, she beckoned Salamand over so that the two could talk face to face.

"Prince Zenon, you displayed splendid abilities in the war with Ende."

"No, that was nowhere near as flawless as the rumours have it."

They shook hands.

In height and breadth, he was a warrior worthy of the name of the Order of the Badger. Even when you looked him straight in the eye, his gaze did not waver. Zenon was not such an expert at mindreading that he could tell what his opponent was planning just from seeing their expression.

I should have brought Noue after all – that futile thought flitted through his brain.

Having come to this, it would be a problem if Ryuicorn's admirers became active. If

they provoked Mephius, Vileena might be placed in even greater danger than she already was. Which was why Zenon made a light jab.

“As for my having pushed Ende back, it is simply because Mephius sent reinforcements.”

Salamand scratched his square jaw thoughtfully. “Still, that Mephius. Nowadays, it is a country that acts completely contrary to justice.”

“Justice according to whom? Each country and each person has their own justice. You are of course a patriot and a fine knight; but for me, the ideals of chivalry and the needs of the country can differ. Sense of values can be different. You should not label someone as immoral simply because their way of thinking is different from your own.”

“Prince Zenon, are you saying that I am acting against my country?”

“Now look here. Labelling opponents and chasing them down, or having them chase you, is not the way to put ideals into practice. Why, you would be going around every day with a naked blade in hand.” Zenon said laughingly.

Although outwardly Salamand maintained a smile suitable for a banquet,

“Even then, I don’t think I would mind.”

“What are you saying?”

“For the sake of living up to my ideals, I would not mind it if, every day, I had to fight those who would stand in my way and dip my sword in their blood. Is what I was saying.”

This man is relentless. While also preserving the gentle smile that was characteristic of the royal family, Zenon cursed inwardly. Salamand was not a man who was all talk and no action either. Even if that was reassuring in an ally, there was currently nothing more worrisome as far as Zenon was concerned. He was wondering whether to break off the discussion for now but –

“Is it not the same for you, Lord Zenon?” Salamand protested. “Chivalry is not something that one explains to others but something that one embodies. Through constant questioning, exploring for answers, and daily struggles, I hope to succeed in personifying it. That you, Lord Zenon, the model of a knight within the royal family, do

not agree with me is truly lamentable,” he declared.

In essence, he was picking a fight. What he was wanting to say was that – *Garbera’s current royal family does not embody the ideals of chivalry.*

For a moment, Zenon looked straight at the other with a serious expression.

The people who had all around been enjoying the banquet and clasping their friends by the shoulders suddenly started to pay attention to the exchange between the two. They watched with bated breath – or it might perhaps better be said – they had found a different source of entertainment at the party.

Zenon himself was known as a general with a relentless personality. He took a step closer to the man who was openly disagreeing with him.

As they were wondering whether he was about to hit him, Zenon heartily clapped Salamand on the shoulder. A stir that was neither admiration nor disappointment went around.

“You’re like a seeker of truth, Salamand,” Zenon said cheerfully. “If every knight was as strict with themselves as you are, it would be a wonderful thing. However...”

“However?”

“There is also paying attention to what other people say. People become stunted if they bury themselves in nothing but their own way of thinking. I was like that as well. And because of that, I got backed into a corner in the battle against Ende. There is observing well those whom you feel you hate, or even those you consider to be enemies, as they might well be mirrors that reflect your own self.”

Salamand did not say anything but his eyes were clearly filled with disdain for Zenon. No doubt he was thinking that he was just lining up pretty words to temporarily smooth things over and run away from their joust.

Zenon was quick to see through the other’s emotions but, without saying anything more, he turned his back on him and returned to where Rinoa was.

“If you were the way you used to be, Lord Zenon,” she said as she presented him with a new wine cup, “there would have been trouble here by now.”

“It is just as you say. I have become a coward.”

“Indeed. That you, Lord Zenon, would end an argument by turning away from it and would call yourself a ‘coward’ is something I would not have said even in jest.”

Rinoa smiled even more brightly than before while he wondered if this was her way of criticizing him.

Well there it is – she was an unfathomable girl, thought Zenon as he once again drained the contents of the cup. From early childhood, the daughter of the Kotjun House had been brought by her father to attend fierce business transactions.

Her expression then turned somewhat serious. “Do be careful. As a matter of fact, that man Salamand has only recently started showing up at the banquets given by the Kotjun family.”

“Oh?”

Thinking about it, just like Zenon in the past, a man who preached about honourable chivalry to that extent was not likely to have any kind feelings towards the Kotjun House. So that meant that he had only recently started drawing close to them.

War funds... is it?

Zenon’s expression hardened for a moment.

Seeing that, Rinoa put her wine cup down.

“Would you not grant me a dance?” she held out her hand.

PART 2

Elsewhere, in Safia, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Ende, the country which stood on equal footing with Mephius and Garbera at the centre of the continent.

Like a rainbow bridge spanning the surface of the earth, the innumerable pavilions of the glittering white palace, which were also known as 'the Thousand Wings', formed a decorative belt that encircled the main shrine.

At almost its very highest point, the flag of the ancient Magic Dynasty was fluttering. It was the flag that proclaimed the legitimacy of the authority of Ende's court.

Ende had originally been a land governed by a loyal vassal of the legendary King Zodias, the founder of the Magic Dynasty, who was said to have ruled the continent for over a hundred years. After a certain amount of time, Zodias became more engrossed in magical research than in governing; because of this, and driven by the need to strike fear and awe in the west, which remained beyond the king's control, the Duke of Ende gave the name Grand Duchy of Ende to the lands he administered within Zodias' dynasty.

One stormy night, Zodias abruptly passed away from a strange illness and the entire continent fell into the chaos of the long struggle for succession. Like hyenas and vultures gathering around fresh carrion, numerous generals and lords each proclaimed that they deserved to be the successor, and continued the bloody conflict, even when there was no longer either a country or a throne left to inherit. Amidst it all, the region of Ende determinedly held its silence.

Without paying any attention to offers of alliances made by other powers, they had simply focused on defending their borders against any invader who tried to cross them. They bided their time for more than ten years until the third Duke of Ende judged that the long war had finally weakened the surrounding lords, and decided to set out with his troops to unify the whole land. After having designated themselves as the legitimate successors, they called themselves the Emperors of Ende. This was the start of the era known in history as 'the Former Empire of Ende' but it only lasted a very short time. That was because at the same period, the Kingdom of Allion was rising in the east of the continent.

The one who ruled as the founding king of Allion was the one who had once been appointed to defend the Dynasty's capital, General Arma Jamil. When insurrection had

turned the capital into a sea of flames, Arma – who was said to have set the fire himself – used the opportunity to plunder the capital's treasures and then fled east. Backed by his considerable wealth, he had then taken former military units and vagrant warriors into his service; and, just like Ende, he had bided his time and saved his strength.

Arma took as many as a hundred women as wives, and claimed that one of them was King Zodias' bastard child. This made him, as her husband, the legitimate ruler of the Dynasty.

A confrontation between Ende and Allion was of course inevitable.

However, while a vanguard from Allion was clashing with Ende's border defence troops, everywhere else the conflicts were gradually dying down; and countries and powers, with forms of government very different from that of the Dynasty, were being established one by one.

This situation marked the end of the millennial era of the hundred-years dynasty^[2] and the world had already plunged into simpler and more savage times; where conflicts were far more about struggling for land with swords and guns than about fighting for the lost sovereign's seal.

With things as they were, Ende and Allion temporarily laid down their weapons. In the peace negotiations that followed the Duke of Ende agreed to no longer call himself emperor and, in exchange, Allion promised to not send soldiers towards Ende for ten years.

Since that time, although Ende and Allion kept their distances from one another, they flew the same flag and claimed that their two nations had jointly inherited the traditions and bloodline of the Dynasty. The influence of the Dynasty had rapidly left a deep impression on Ende's cultural style. In many of its famous buildings, including the aforementioned 'Thousand Wings' palace, as well as in its paintings and music, there were countless masterpieces belonging to the school of antiquity. The people of Ende were contemptuous of things like the art from Garbera, which the neighbouring country Mephius – with a mixture of masochism and envy – appreciated as 'culture', but which according to them had only been around for a few decades and which could thus be called no more than a fad, unworthy of their attention.

This was Ende.

All those who lived there bragged that Safia was the most magnificent capital in the world, but currently, that same capital was gripped with apprehension over a family quarrel that, with more accuracy, might be said to display human behaviour at its most savage and primitive.

The confrontation between the two princes was finally coming to a head.

The older of the brothers, First Prince Jeremie, who usually feigned belonging to the moderate faction and acted as though he had absolutely no interest in the struggle for succession, had now begun lashing out at his younger brother.

“Marching on Garbera was an act of arbitrary willfulness on my younger brother’s part. He falsified our father’s, the Grand Duke’s, words to make it look as though he had permitted it; then moved the army because of his own personal feelings and as a way of showing off his power. And in the end, what results did it bring? Having been unable to predict that Mephius would send reinforcements, he scurried home helplessly, without taking a single step towards Garbera’s capital. Ende is the laughingstock. How could such a foolish and uncouth lout shoulder the weight of this historic country?”

Taking things from a different angle, the reason why Jeremie had started talking this way was because he could no longer ignore his brother’s existence. At about the same time that Prince Eric was marching towards Garbera, there had been an incident in which wild dragons had started to rampage through Dairan, a district in Ende’s north. To protect a land that he had been close to since early childhood, Eric had immediately turned the army around and had swiftly and valiantly hunted the dragons.

That exploit had spread not only through Dairan but throughout the whole of Ende and had brought a change in the power relationship in Safia. Although ostensibly Jeremie still had many nobles supporting him, there were not a few voices that wondered whether a man like Eric, who was able to make swift decisions and take action, did not deserve to be the next Grand Duke.

Jeremie was a man who understood the subtleties of the court. Therefore, he was able to sense that the atmosphere was dangerous for him.

If I don’t attack now, other nobles will steadily get dragged into that atmosphere – was another reason for his impatience.

On the other side, there was the younger brother, Second Prince Eric.

Naturally, he had perceived that a wind pushing him from behind had started to blow. And so Eric had made the prompt decision that now was the time to go on the offensive.

“In the first place, there has never been a single record of wild dragons in Dairan. On top of that, it was as if their appearance had been timed for when I was away, exactly as though it had someone’s design behind it. Which reminds me, my brother Jeremie seems to be close with the Bureau of Sorcery for some reason. Retainers saw him sneaking in and out of there not so long ago,” he commented loudly.

Since the disturbance in Dairan, Eric had been monitoring his brother. As a result, he was able to disclose that Jeremie had personal contact with the Bureau of Sorcery, and when that scandal flew around the entire court, what had merely been a shift in the ‘atmosphere’ changed into a rising ‘wind’.

And the leading figures in the duchy were eager to ascertain in which direction that wind would blow. In a sense, that was a fight fiercer than the one between the brothers; which was only natural, given that who they cooperated with now would mean the difference between heaven and earth for their lives in the future.

Tactics for information and psychological warfare were being deployed in all quarters. There were those who pretended to remain with him while storing up information about the older brother Jeremie’s side, those who were spreading false rumours that the younger brother Eric was preparing his troops to attack Safia, those who were desperate to win over the attendants who looked after the ill and bed-ridden Grand Duke...

Inaudible to the ear, the crash of war from invisible swords, spears and arrows resounded throughout Safia.

“Come closer.” A sonorous voice resounded in the circular chamber.

The walls, which should originally have been grey, shone gold. This was because of the light coming from a lofty pillar, which appeared to be modelled on the immigrants’ space ship, that stood towering in the centre of the chamber. The light was emitted from a sphere that was roughly the size of a human head.

From slightly higher than the bottom of the pillar, walkways ran in eight directions and just before they reached the walls of the circular chamber, they each had a space in which highbacked chairs on pedestals had been installed.

On each one of them a man was sitting, so that they were, in essence, surrounding the pillar. All of them wore long robes that reached down to their ankles and their collars were tightly fastened. As they wore their cowls low, their faces could not be seen.

“It appears that this country is entering a new phase in its history.” One of them said then another stood up, “There will be a certain amount of disorder. It is fine to say that Jeremie and Eric are competing for power. But that is all. We are watchmen to the last. To us, battles, political strife, and even the rise and fall of countries are no more than the ripples of a single stone on the surface of the ocean. The roll of the ocean’s waves easily swallow them up and ripples soon vanish.”

He spoke sternly and all the other sorcerers nodded simultaneously. The man who had risen to make that statement was the Director of Ende’s Bureau of Sorcery, Wodan. The long beard at his chin was woven into a braid in the style of the aristocrats from the era of the Ancient Dynasty.

“Is that not so, Hezel?”

At the base of the pillar, where Wodan’s gaze fell, there was a single man. He too had on a robe with a cowl but his clothes were somewhat dirty, his arms were bound behind his back and his knees were to the ground.

The man addressed as Hezel painfully lifted his head and seemed to say something but no voice came out.

Wodan snapped his fingers. “Take it off,” he ordered.

Behind Hezel, two soldiers stood to attention, spears in hand. On both sides of their faces something like a pale, lightning-shaped tattoo stretched from their eyelids to their lips. They belonged to a special class of soldiers within Ende, those who guarded the Bureau of Sorcery. They stretched out their hands and removed a metallic collar from around Hezel’s neck.

“Master Wodan,” a voice wheezed out from Hezel’s mouth. He tried to continue further but he was in a terribly weakened state and he broke into a violent coughing fit.

Wodan raised his hand.

"It's fine. Your five senses were cut off for a month. Your voice will not come out easily even by the third day. But when I see you, who is like a beloved son to me, reduced to this state, I still cannot blame myself for having gone too far. The sin you committed is that grave. Not only did you draw close to Prince Jeremie and request funding assistance on nothing more than your own authority, but you also tempted the prince into removing vessels of sorcery from the underground. It seems you used your subordinates to study them, but this too is deserving of a severe punishment."

His head lowered, Hezel did not move.

The vessels of sorcery were the many artefacts which had been handed down in Ende from the ancient Dynastic period and could be called the very symbol of the Grand Duchy. Hezel had used them to revive ancient sorcery that manipulated dragons. This was not unrelated to the dragons which had suddenly rampaged through the region of Dairan. In other words, Hezel had been involved with something that would deeply affect Ende's politics. Although the Bureau of Sorcery was one of the country's institutions, it was by nature supposed to maintain a distance from politics and government.

"At the previous meeting, there were those who said that we should banish you forever, just as we did with that fool Reizus. But you are young and show more promise than any other sorcerer of your generation. Therefore, on my name of Wodan, Director of the Bureau of Sorcery, I had you sent to prison for a month. If you have learned from that..."

"B-But," Hezel spoke, interrupting him. His voice was weak and hoarse, but it must have been surprising that he had enough strength left to talk at all as Wodan unintentionally stopped speaking. Hezel gradually lifted his head although his neck and shoulders were trembling as though someone was holding him down hard. "Prince Eric's power and influence have also increased. If the second prince, who has no understanding of sorcery, was to take the throne of the Grand Duchy, we would be at a disadvantage."

When Wodan heard that, he appeared to regain his composure and shook his head.

"You are saying that you acted with the Bureau in mind? Certainly, Prince Jeremie has a greater understanding of sorcery than anyone else in the successive generations of

the Grand Ducal House. I would go further and say that he has shown an interest, as that person has studied artefacts to quite an extent. It appears that he would be very interested in using magic to rule. If he were to become Grand Duke, our Bureau of Sorcery would indeed probably obtain greater power than ever before."

"In that case..."

"Power is futile," Wodan callously shot him down. "Power that can only be demonstrated within a country has no meaning. Say, for example, that Ende was on the verge of being destroyed by some calamity. We would cooperate to defend the country, but if in the end it became dangerous, we would just as easily abandon it. The assets for our preservation are knowledge and sorcery; we cannot trade them in for any one country. If afterwards we need to look for a new place to settle in, it will simply be a matter of creating a new organisation."

"..."

"Besides, if you are saying that you acted with the Bureau in mind, how will you explain away the affair with Garbera? When the general called Ryucown rose in rebellion, Prince Jeremie secretly gave him assistance. That was also your suggestion. What were you trying to do by needlessly prolonging Garbera's internal strife?"

"Well," Hezel spoke in a toneless voice from deep within his somewhat dirty cowl, "it was simply that the prince thought it would be a good opportunity to break down the relationship between the three countries."

"Your ulterior motive is as clear as day. Once Garbera was neutralised, you would have directed the prince's attention to the west. Your goal is - yes, indeed, it is Barbaroi, is it not?"

When the word 'Barbaroi' was uttered, a voiceless commotion spread throughout the room. The seven sorcerers who, until then, had watched in silence repeatedly glanced towards each other.

"You must not interfere there." Before the disturbance had died down, the Director of the Bureau of Sorcery warned in a tone of voice stronger than any he had used so far. "From the start, we, Ende's Bureau of Sorcery, exist neither for the sake of the country nor for the sake of merely handing down sorcery techniques to posterity. We exist for nothing other than protecting Magic King Zodias' dying wish by watching over the fate - the predictions, the future - that he wove for this land. Repeat it, Hezel. What were

the last words that King Zodias once transmitted to the sorcerers who were faithful to him?" "Above all else, defend Barbaroi to the last."

Hezel's breathing was ragged as he spoke. Wodan nodded but Hezel immediately cut through his words.

"In recent years, movement has been observed in Barbaroi. The sorcerer called Garda manifested in the west and, as the ether was greatly disturbed, how could it not help but waking from sleep for a while? In spite of your fears, you, Master Wodan, must surely understand. When King Zodias gave the order to defend Barbaroi to the last, it wasn't because he held that land dear. The king had a king's plan. He even thought to warn us that the plan would be wasted if other people were to go and approach that terrifying existence which granted the king knowledge of magic. It is now, now that Barbaroi is about to start moving again, that we need to take action. What will come of stubbornly defending King Zodias' testament, he who carried away the Dragon God's Claw and disappeared as though fleeing from this world? Director, to have Barbaroi in our hands. Our Bureau of Sorcery could then anew..."

"Silence!" Wodan roared. "You speak of wickedness. In a space where you could neither see nor hear anything, an empty space in which you could not feel the touch of anything, as though you were floating through the cosmos – although you have been locked up in that prison of sorcery for a month, one would not believe it. I have no hesitation in praising your courage. But I repeat, you are young. Too young. Regarding Garda and Barbaroi, of course we must reinforce our monitoring. But it is not yet at a stage where we need to intervene. Naturally, the same goes for Ende's internal affairs. When it comes to the world of men, we must remain as 'eyes' to the end. We cannot be the 'mouth' that disturbs Fate. It is impossible that you do not understand the meaning of this."

"..."

"Master Wodan," one of the sorcerers who had, until then, been watching silently opened his mouth, "this man is more dangerous than Reizus. For now, will you imprison him temporarily and urge him to reform? Or will you deal with him as things are?"

Wodan thought about it for a moment.

"Hezel. I will grant you a one week deferment. Rest your body. After that, you will be

summoned here once more. If, at that time, your intentions have not changed, I will have to think about locking you in that prison forever. Do you understand?"

"... Aye." Hezel answered weakly. It was not that he had been overwhelmed by Wodan's words, but rather that his body's weakened state had finally taken its toll. And in the first place, this was not a situation in which he could say anything.

Supported on either side by the tattooed soldiers, Hezel was led from the chamber as though being dragged away.

Passing through a long corridor, he was then thrown into a small, bare, square-shaped room.

After the soldiers had left, Hezel, lying face up on the floor, looked up at the low ceiling without stirring.

"I'm young, is it?" A hoarse voice escaped from his cracked lips. "Certainly, I am young. Far more so than my father who has experienced the passing of hundreds of years."

The words he uttered were strange but although his eyes were dim, they held neither anger nor fear nor even irritation.

Instead, his lips formed into a fearless smile.

"I'm a little tired of it here. Ende's treasured vessels of sorcery aren't particularly noteworthy. As for simply watching over things... I would rather spread the fires of chaos. Will the centre of the continent soon be ablaze? Or will the ripples from that single stone that I threw extinguish the flames?"

Hezel half raised the upper part of his body and the cowl fell back from his head.

Hezel, a member of Ende's Bureau of Sorcery, should be the same man who had visited the sorcerer who became Garda during the recent upheaval in the west. Yet the burn which Garda's subordinate, the witch Tahī, had inflicted on his face at the time was nowhere to be seen.

In fact, his very features had changed. Back then, he had the youthful, handsome face of a young man, but now his pale countenance was somewhat flat and it was hard to tell his actual age.

It was a face that had, in the past, also been seen at the imperial court of Mephius.

PART 3

Aks, who belonged to the Dawnlight Wings Division, looked down on an area located in the western corner of Apta Fortress with a complicated expression.

It was there, at a section on the ground floor level where the fortress faced the cliff, that the former Imperial Guards, Pashir included, were currently being detained.

Among the winged dragon officers, Aks easily had the most outstanding physique. Yet the other day when he had exchanged blows with Pashir, the runner-up in the Gladiatorial competition, he had been sent sprawling right at the start. He could still feel the throbbing pain from where a fist like a stone had slammed into his jaw. He rubbed at it but in his heart there was anger and resentment.

He loved and respected the grey-haired general Rogue Saian. Because the general had supported the prince, who had opposed the emperor, his position had been downgraded; but Aks thought that action truly was “just like Father”. However, when he heard that the Prince's Imperial Guards were to become their colleagues, he had felt strong antipathy.

Those who belonged to an army corps that is mainly deployed in airborne battles were all on the same "boat" and had a stronger bond than typical land soldiers. They were comrades who shared the same destiny since, in such an environment, if a mistake was made in even just one of the posts they were assigned, they might all fall plummeting from the sky.

And a bunch of outsiders were coming into their midst. They were subordinates of the prince who could be said to be the reason why Rogue Saian was kept away from the capital; and on top of that, Pashir was the heinous criminal who had once tried to rise in rebellion against Mephius. Naturally, he could not welcome them with open arms.

And so, he picked a quarrel with Pashir. As for why he had chosen him, his intention had been to thrash the brawniest of them as a warning.

But the tables had been turned on him. Pashir's title of runner-up at the gladiatorial tournament, and his history as a former sword slave, were apparently not just for show.

But now, Pashir and the others were being detained on suspicion of being connected

to the west.

Aks certainly had not been happy about Pashir, but he found it hard to believe that the newcomer had again been intending to harm Mephius or that he was connected to the west.

Most of the Imperial Guards were people who had been taken out of slavery by Crown Prince Gil. It was unthinkable that they would have been involved in the prince's assassination. Even if the west had called out to him seductively or approached him with a scheme, it was more natural to suppose that a man like Pashir would reject it outright.

With the war against Taúlia being at a stalemate, Rogue's mood was not good. Since he knew 'Father's' personality well. Aks realized, of course, that he had no enthusiasm for this war. Quite the opposite, in fact the balance of his emotions were being tipped in an unusual direction, and it was said that he had done everything he could to stop the fighting.

And, infected by his superior officer's feelings, Aks too was disgusted with it.

This is a stupid war – he sighed and started walking. But before he had taken even a few steps, a woman called to him to stop from a passageway to the side. He recognised her face, she was a servant at Apta. Unbecoming of her youthful and quiet appearance, she gripped Aks' hand and tried to invite him to her room.

"Oi oi, it's still broad daylight!" He protested but she looked desperately determined and would not let go of his hand.

Aks figured that fooling about for a change wasn't so bad, but when the door to the room was opened and he saw that there was another woman waiting on the bed, he was, as could be expected, surprised.

Furthermore, she was a strangely alluring beauty, so pale it was as if all colour had been drained from her.

Aks gulped reflexively. Feelings of anticipation whirled in his chest, but then, the woman spoke.

Half a day later, Aks came running up to General Rogue Saian.

“What’s this, you have something to discuss? That’s rare.”

“Actually, there is something that I really want to ask of you, General.”

With that preface, Aks led the general to the same room that the servant girl had invited him to.

“The airship unit got into some trouble with General Narbal’s men. It would have been fine if it had just been an ordinary fight, but the unit and Nabarl’s men were detained in the same room. The other side pulled out swords and guns, there is going to be a murder the way things are. General, won’t you please come and give the guys from the unit a good talking to?”

As soon as he heard that, Rogue raced down the passageways with a speed that did not match his age. The ruckus between Aks and Pashir was one thing but an uproar like this one was, in a manner of speaking, his own fault for not having been able to pull the men together.

When Rogue opened the door, for a moment, his expression was the same as Aks’ had been half a day earlier.

There were two women on the bed. One was the servant who had invited Aks. The other had a face that was unknown to him. Her features were so beautiful that even Rogue was taken aback. Her complexion was as pale as a dove’s and her lips, which were highlighted with rouge, glistened all the more seductively because of it.

“It has been a long time, General.” Yet when the beauty spoke, it was in the voice of a man.

Rogue’s eyes started, and not because Aks had quietly closed the door behind him. He remembered that voice and looking at it again, he recognised the man before him as someone he knew.

“You’re Shique!?”

“General, please, your voice,” Shique, disguised as a woman, put a finger to his red lips.

Rogue hurriedly shut his mouth and turned around to Aks, who was standing at the ready behind him. The large winged dragon officer wore an embarrassed-looking expression.

When he had been an Imperial Guard, Shique had only spoken with the man a little. Remembering that, Shique had first asked a servant girl that he had previously been familiar with – since Orba had asked him to gather information on the fort, he had no choice but to become close with her – to call Aks over, and had then asked him to fetch the general.

“I-I’m sure I heard that you went missing after the fight with the Black Armoured Division. You were alive? Then what have you been doing up until now? Your companions are currently imprisoned here in Apta. Oh, was it because you learned of that that you deliberately disguised yourself and snuck in here? Don’t tell me you plan to save them. What splendid spirit to have done so without worrying about the danger to your own life, however in the current circumstances...”



“General, General, please calm down,” Shique interrupted Rogue’s words with a smile. Then immediately after, he was wracked by a violent coughing fit. His back and shoulders shook for some time because of it.

“I am of course worried about them, but I have a different reason for coming especially to see you, General.”

“I-I see,” as though embarrassed at having lost his calm, Rogue took a deep breath. An irrepressible emotion was welling up from the depths of his heart. Deliberately preventing himself from thinking about what it was, he stared at Shique once more. “But that is an impressive disguise. No, if I remember rightly, you also masqueraded as a beautiful slave woman at the time of Zaat Quark’s rebellion.”

“You have a good memory.”

Shique was occasionally scrunching up his face and rounding his back as though he was in poor physical shape. Each time he did so, the servant girl rubbed his back anxiously.

Rogue was aware of a throbbing palpitation. “That time... it would have been on the prince’s orders. What about this time? You went missing after the fight with the Black Armoured Division, why did you risk coming back to Apta?”

Shique wordlessly took a letter from his breast and handed it to the general.

Rogue read through it at a stroke.

“Impossible,” he said in a voice like a whisper. Then he read it again from the beginning. Finding it funny how those actions mirrored his own, Shique almost laughed but started coughing again.

Rogue’s breathing gradually grew rough. Finally, after taking another quick look at the entire document, he asked, “is it true?” perhaps because his emotions were struggling from every angle, his face was rather expressionless.

“It is all written there.”

In three days? Rogue murmured in his heart. In three days, the prince would proceed towards the border and reveal himself. Yes... Prince Gil Mephius. If the contents of this letter were true, he had learned of General Oubary’s plan to assassinate him and had

deliberately used the timing of that plan to throw himself into the river.

The intention had been to bring Oubary's plan to light and hopefully catch the unit tasked with carrying it out, but the prince had sensed that there was 'an even darker shadow' behind them and hid himself for a time in the west by feigning his own death.

His breathing still rough, Rogue repeatedly shut his eyes then opened them wide.

The prince is alive.

Why was it that simply by thinking that, he felt that it was as though a bright ray of light was shining both on himself, who had felt cast in darkness, and on Mephius' future? Imperial Prince Gil was a hero who had soared to fame in the space of less than a year, nevertheless it was still unknown whether he had any political resourcefulness.

However, he is the Crown Prince.

Right now, that was the most important thing as far as Rogue was concerned. What was paramount above all else was the fact that a legitimate member of the imperial family was openly criticizing the emperor's current course.

His face pale, Shique watched Rogue's conflicted demeanour. After a short while, the veteran general spoke.

"Understood."

That was all. He did not state whether he believed the contents of the letter or not. Nor did he talk about what he intended to do. On the contrary, he asked, "what are you going to do from here on?"

"I," Shique interrupted himself to clear his throat, "I will return to the west. Actually, there was a commotion when I left and I'm worried about the situation over there. I should go back for now to check th..."

"You cannot," Rogue declared.

"General..."

"Whatever the details, we are currently at war with Taúlia. That is undeniable. I cannot simply send back, to the enemy forces, a person who has been inside our own camp."

“I am not fit to be a spy. I attract too much attention.”

“How dare you say that when you’ve disguised yourself to this extent. Anyway, you’re staying in Apta. I’ll find some reason or another to provide you with a room. Lie low there.”

“General,” Shique shook his pale face. Having fled like a deserter, he did not believe that he would be able to return to Taúlia as things were. But he was afraid that the situation might have become complicated for Orba. He also needed to report that he had been able to safely leave Taúlia with the letter, but – “General, I...”

As Shique tried to get up, Rogue forcefully pulled his arm. As the servant girl screamed, Shique’s body slumped forward. Rogue looked intently at the area of his back and said –

“You’ve been shot.”

The reason why the woman’s clothing he wore only bulged oddly on his back was because the bandages had been repeatedly wrapped around him there, while in the front the added padding was really made to look like the swelling of breasts.

“Have you had a doctor look at it?”

“The bullet seems to have gotten lodged,” Shique smiled, his face ashen.

“In your current situation, you couldn’t have gone to a proper doctor. It will have been an unlicensed doctor practicing illegally in some back alley.”

Rogue’s assertion was correct. When Shique had been leaving Taúlia, he had been shot from behind by one of the soldiers forming part of the net. The steel bullet had pierced through from his back to his lower chest. That he had not fallen from his horse indeed made him worthy of being a renowned former gladiator.

Although he had given himself some rudimentary medical treatment on the way, it had been hard to push down the fever and the pain that had been gnawing at him from within. In all honesty, it would not have surprised him if he had fainted upon coming in sight of Apta. However he had gritted his teeth and had snuck into the town, which had once been well known to him, and using everything that he had been able to carry out of Taúlia as payment, he had called on a back-alley doctor.

But as Rogue had said, he could not go for proper treatment. His festering wound had merely been wrapped in fresh bandages and he had only been given antipyretic medicine.

“That cough comes from your internal organs being damaged. It’s dangerous to leave it. I have seen over and over again people laughing one day only to drop dead the next. At any rate, you won’t make it to Taúlia in that state.”

“...”

“I’ll get you an army surgeon from the Dawnlight Wings Division. He’s a friend of mine so don’t worry.”

As he spoke, Rogue gently pushed Shique back down to the bed. Having used all of his physical strength just to lift himself up that much, Shique collapsed onto it without any resistance.

After that, Shique was moved to a room and received medical treatment from an army surgeon.

Lying alone on the snow-white bed, he found the situation irritating and strange.

There was a window high above him, and that cut-out square was his only point of contact with the outside world. The sun had risen then set, the shadows had deepened, then the day had dawned again Except when he slept, Shique gazed at that view without growing tired of it.

It’s been two days since then... no, has it been three?

It was because of the medicine that his head was fuzzy, he decided. So that meant that Orba should be nearing the border around now. Or maybe, since he would have realised that a net had been laid out and surveillance had been reinforced, he had not yet left Taúlia.

There was nothing more that Shique could do. He could only bet on Orba’s ability and luck for what came next.

There didn't appear to be any conspicuous movements here in Apta. The army still hadn't stirred yet either. Rogue, who believed in the letter, must be restraining Nabarl, the commander-in-chief, by every means possible.

But still, on the third day – If Orba was unable to appear as Gil Mephius, the general would not be able to hold Nabarl back any longer.

Remembering Rogue's reaction upon reading the letter, Shique smiled weakly.

You couldn't have played the part of a prince for more than half a year.

Even so.

Isn't it interesting? If it weren't for the current state of Mephius, the general might not have seen your survival as a ray of light.

Right.

Isn't it exactly as though everything, even the pain and suffering, was a path laid out for your sake?

I suppose that besides individual ability, above all else, the situations in which they are needed are what create heroes.

Yes, that was what was missing with me.

Shique had grown up in a poor family. Both of his parents had worked by the sweat of their brow, yet even so it had been difficult to earn the day's food. Still, even while living that life, Shique's mother tried to ensure by all means that her son wouldn't lose his pride. She bought books even when it meant going without meals, she gave him an education, and she taught him the basics of etiquette as well as the foreign words that she herself knew.

His mother claimed that, tracing her family line to the distant past, she was descended from an aristocratic lineage of the Magic Dynasty. It seemed that in its heyday it had even held the right to succession to the throne, although its rank in the order of precedence was low.

Whether that was true or not, he didn't know. But at the very least, his mother believed it. Or maybe, in a life of sipping muddy water, she had found an emotional crutch by

believing that mouldy old history.

But for the very young Shique, and also for his father, it became a burden.

His father had vanished as though running away from his mother, who was completely wrapped up in her pride in that very dubious lineage. From then on, his mother had lavished all her love on Shique. Even though she had to sell her own body to earn their daily income, she had made sure that he received an education, had bought him expensive clothes, and had him learn courtly dancing and the art of swordplay.

His mother's voice as she hugged his shoulders and whispered "The blood of the Aeland family runs in you", the unsteady gleam in her eyes, the way she touched him, her very existence, so to speak, was oppressive for Shique.

Mother...

Shique mentally called out while still looking out through the high window.

I couldn't be the son you hoped for me to be. But that cause for pride that you saw in me, I've found it somewhere else.

So I...

It was two days after Shique had managed to reach Apta's fortress.

Of course, Gowen, Pashir and the rest did not know that he was close by. In that narrow and confined space, their impatience and irritation were only growing stronger.

For them, it was another day that saw no improvement from the previous one.

But around dusk, distant screams were heard that would completely change the fate of the former Imperial Guards.

Gowen, once an overseer of sword slaves, had a bad premonition from the start. The screams were coming from the direction of the dragon pen.

That day as well, Hou Ran had spent all her time looking after the dragons. It happened at the time that she was returning them to their cages after having them out for a walk.

As the last dragon was going back to its cage, and before she could properly turn the key, she was seized from behind.

Her mouth was blocked and she was dragged to a patch of grass.

Usually a number of slaves would assist for large-scale tasks like cleaning the dragons' cages, but when it came to the dragons themselves, because Hou Ran took care of them alone, there was not the shadow of a person in the area.

Hou Ran was pinned down by several men.

She could not make a sound but she stared at them sharply. As for the men, their lustful gazes openly drank up the sight of Ran's body, on which the red rays of the sun and the shadows of the cages cast a mottled pattern.

They were the same soldiers who were always vulgarly calling out to her and were probably Nabarl's men.

"Anyway, she's a woman from the west. No one's gonna blame us even if we do what we like with her."

"We'll take care of you like Zerdian men couldn't."

The men's hands crawled over Ran's dark skin.

And she could not move to resist against them. Ran's furious breathing escaped ineffectively from the gap between her mouth and the hands.

Just as the men had begun to strip her of her clothes, a large silhouette suddenly blocked the light from the setting sun.

The big shadow that also engulfed Ran's limbs belonged to the Baian – a medium-sized dragon – that had just been let into its cage.

Its eyes had become bloodshot. It had burst out of its cage with enough force to break it.

Faster than the men could scream, its mouth gaped open, pulling with it strings of saliva. Fangs like swords pierced through the back of a man's neck and vivid red blood splashed freely. Screams and angry bellowing erupted, but the dragon's roars drowned them out.

By the time soldiers who had heard the uproar arrived, swords and guns drawn, the men who had pinned Ran down had all lost their lives.

"I-In position!"

When a man who seemed to be captain issued the order, soldiers fell to one knee and readied their guns. Before he could give the order to fire, a human figure quickly interposed itself between the guns and the flesh-devouring dragon.

Ran was covered in blood and her eyes were watery with tears.

"I'll calm him down. Put your guns away."

"Move from there. If you don't move, we'll shoot you."

"This child is waiting for him to come back. I promised I would protect him until then."

As soon as she had spoken, Ran turned her back to the row of gun muzzles and clung to the Baian's neck. The dragon roared, a bloody froth spewing from its maw. It shook its neck as though irritated and Ran's body was flung to the ground. The Baian bared its fangs menacingly. The blood had gotten it excited. When things got to this point, even tamers who had known a dragon for years might end up being eaten.

But Ran did not give up and tackled the Baian again and again. Even when its tail smashed into her and its fangs drew right before her, she desperately hugged its neck, stroked its scales and whispered something to it. Her whole body was already covered in cuts and bruises from being sent flying time after time, and because her skin tore when it scraped against the dragon's hard scales.

With her cheeks torn to shreds, it was no longer the men's blood she was covered in but her own.

Watching the way she pressed herself against the dragon even so, the soldiers were utterly dumbfounded. As they stood there stock still, the Baian's voice gradually grew calmer. As it stopped stamping its feet and waving its tail, head drooping limply, Ran

seemed to lean against the dragon and sunk slowly down.

She had lost consciousness.

When Nabarl received the news, for a moment his face held neither surprise nor joy.

That only Hou Ran had been less strictly confined was because he had judged that if even a single disturbance arose around the woman from the west, he would be able to make good use of the situation, but he certainly had not expected it to go as far as having all the soldiers assigned to monitor her being eaten by a dragon.

But anyway –

“That accursed western woman. So she’s revealed her true colours.” Nabarl kicked himself out of his chair as though he were truly enraged. “She must have been aiming to destroy this camp from the inside. Throw those bastards in a cage! As an example, and as retaliation, they’re to be executed by firing squad.”

CHAPTER 5

THE LION AND THE GIRL, AND THE GRAVESTONES

PART 1

Two days after Orba had been placed under restraint, Bouwen Tedos went to visit the sage Ravan in his room.

Originally, he had wanted to cross-examine the matter as soon as he had heard about it, but with the reinforcements from all over arriving in Taúlia one after another, he had been delayed. Which was why it was not only about Orba's affair that he felt like venting his complaints to Ravan. It was also because of the rumour that Ravan planned to delay Taúlia's Governor-General Ax Bazgan's return to the castle.

"This is going to sound like whining but I cannot handle everything by myself."

"This also counts as experience." Ravan was lying on his stomach on a sheet spread over the floor. He was smoking.

In theory, he had recovered sufficiently to be able to stand and walk, but he needed to use a cane to do so. Although the old man looked like he did not care about the gazes of others, Bouwen knew that he was, in fact, a mass of pride. As long as he was unaccustomed to a cane, he would hate having his ungainly figure being seen. He probably had no intention of taking a single step outside until he became much better at walking with it. Because of that idiosyncrasy, Bouwen, whom he trusted, was seeing him in postures like this one where he was lying on his belly.

"When the time comes, you will have to issue the orders to lead the troops from other countries. You should look over each of their faces in person. If you do not meet them personally, it will make a world of difference in the future."

"I understand that but – right, Master, what is more important right now is Orba," Bouwen cut to the main topic.

The one who had spread the surveillance net around Orba and his companions had been Natokk, the commander of the Sixth Army Corps. Upon asking him, he heard that

he had received the order from Ax and had obtained permission from Ravan.

I didn't hear a single word about it – although thinking that he should not be making complaints, although believing that he should not be making complaints, considering that he was basically Taúlia's current commander-in-chief, still he felt abashed by it.

"What's going on with him at the moment?"

"He is under confinement. He won't talk even when he is asked about sending a secret messenger to Mephius. Normally he would be tortured on suspicion of being connected with an enemy country but... Anyway."

He was the hero who had defeated Garda. Moreover, he had just recently achieved success in the battle against Mephius. But when push came to shove – that is, when it came to defending the country – Bouwen was capable of cold-blooded ruthlessness. If Orba's attitude was too obstinate, sending him to the underground torture chamber was an option.

"Hmm," Ravan breathed out tobacco smoke, "but even if he sent a secret message, what were the contents? Given that it's Mephius, there are very few things worth reporting to it about our troop formation. When all's said and done, this war is the same as last time; and a surprise attack won't work anymore. Conceivably, Orba and his companions could take action from within Taúlia simultaneously with an attack from Mephius but... that's not realistic either. Orba and his friends are too few in number."

The difficulty of how to deal with Orba's unit also arose. It could be assumed that the Mephian Gilliam, who had gotten in the way of Natokk's men, was an accomplice in the betrayal; but what about the likes of Talcott or Stan, who had been mercenaries in Taúlia before Orba had arrived, or Kurun, who had been an apprentice soldier in Helio?

Of course, since they could not be left as they were, like Orba, they had all been imprisoned in a large chamber.

In other words, both in Apta and in Taúlia, the two cities separated by the River Yunos, Orba and quite a few of his acquaintances had been deprived of their freedom.

"That is why we need Orba to tell us with his own mouth what the contents were. Master Ravan, could you not go and see him in person?"

"Sorry, but I am not going on a fool's errand," Ravan said very plainly. "Even if I go now, the mask won't speak. He will come begging for mercy at some point. A more important problem is maintaining provisions for Taúlia," Ravan moved onto another topic, bringing to a close the topic of Orba for the time being.

The next day, however, as Bouwen left the castle building to go and receive the regular report from the border guards, "Sir Bouwen" – someone called out to him from horseback. He had a dark black beard and wore blue armour. Going by rumour, he was the Blue Dragon of Kadyne, Nilgif.

He had just arrived in Taúlia late the previous day. But only he and his older brother had passed through the gate. When asked about the Kadynian soldiers that they were supposed to be leading, they had nonchalantly replied that– "they were slow. They'll probably be arriving in two or three days."

Although at first glance his body looked heavy, Nilgif jumped nimbly from his horse without a trace of difficulty.

"I heard about Orba," he said.

"Orba?"

"Don't play dumb. It seems he's being detained."

Bouwen brazened it out. But he cursed inwardly. Orba's arrest was supposed to be a closely guarded secret. Officially, he had not yet recovered from the earlier gunshot wound and it had been decided that he should concentrate on his medical treatment.

Who let that out?

"Is it because he's Mephian?"

"What do you mean?"

"The rumour among the people of Taúlia is that as he is a former inhabitant of Mephius, you intend to make an example of him and have him executed."

"Ridiculous."

"Right. It's ridiculous. I haven't repaid my 'debt' to him yet. Besides the fact that he

saved my family, our fight during the war was also left hanging. I'd be bothered if he was arbitrarily disposed of."

"Nilgif, where are your manners?"

This time, it was the Red Dragon, Moldorf, who appeared. Bouwen had seen him from a distance during the battle at the Coldrin Hills. Although that time, he had been an enemy.

"Sir Ax is the hero who saved the entire western region and Orba is known as his strongest 'sword'. Nilgif, rumours can't be trusted. Sir Bouwen will have realised long ago that if he were to be executed, Taúlia would come under blame from every corner of the west." Although Moldorf apologised for his younger brother's rudeness, his words were an insinuation directed against Bouwen.

"Indeed," Bouwen shook his head, his expression studiously blank, "Orba is a mercenary under our Taúlia. Although you are our partner in the alliance, I cannot simply disclose where he currently is, nor what assignment he has been entrusted with. With that..."

Bouwen sprang his horse and got away from the Red and Blue Dragons, but of course, that would not settle the situation. If it was even being talked about among the people, they would no longer be able to conceal the situation with Orba. But if the truth came out about how he had been confined for having sent a secret message to Mephius, morale in Taúlia would fall into chaos.

Eei, he's a difficult man to deal with. Now, at this point, why Mephius?

Bouwen's ire rose. If it had to come to this, it would have been better if the gunshot injury had gotten worse and he had died. Would they end up secretly taking his life, or, out of consideration for his achievement in defeating Garda, would they take his mask and throw him out?

But, it's a pity – Bouwen thought. 'Now, at this point' also applied to him. That man would be a loss. Isn't there some other way?

Because of that thought, on the afternoon of the same day, Bouwen filled an interval of his busy working schedule by going in person to the room in which Orba was imprisoned.

"There are rumours about you,' said Bouwen. "Apparently, there are many voices among the people pleading for your life to be saved. Did you spread the rumour yourself expecting things to turn out this way?"

He was only trying to surprise a confession out of Orba, who had been there ever since that night and who had seen no one other than Taúlian soldiers.

For his part, Orba was silent. In that dreary room, with only a table and chair inside it, he was like a chained dragon crouching patiently and quietly. But even as he maintained that pretence, the sharp gaze concealed behind the mask seemed to say that he was sharpening his fangs and claws, and that any human who carelessly got too close would be torn to shreds and devoured in a single strike.

Take off that mask! – Receiving no reaction, Bouwen was seized with the impulse to scream and forcefully tear off the iron mask. His face hidden, there was no indication of the other's feelings or intentions.

But he bore with it.

Just as Bouwen was about to leave, Orba opened his mouth.

"The third day."

"What?"

"Today is the third day since I came here. Is that correct?"

"That sounds right."

A trivial thing. He assumed that trivial thing was an excuse to start talking but, contrary to his expectations, Orba shut his mouth again.

Bouwen Tedos stood there, unmoving, for a short while, but there was still a ton of things he needed to finish before the day was done. In the end, he left.

Even after Bouwen had left, Orba remained seated in the chair.

While it appeared nothing had changed, the way he occasionally stood up and wandered restlessly around the room showed that this was not because he had remained calm and composed. But if he focused on only one thing, he feared he might become paralysed by it.

He occasionally acted as though he were practicing with a sword even though he was empty-handed. As to what he was thinking about, it had no direct connection with either Mephius or Taúlia, but was rather along the lines of – *if I was up against an opponent like Moldorf or Nilgif on horseback, how should I deal with it?*

The time spent waiting was frustrating. When Bouwen had come to visit, he had almost spontaneously jumped at the opportunity, since he knew he would have to wait a long time again if he missed it.

So he instead reminisced about the battlefield. The great generals Moldorf and Nilgif were masters at wielding spears on horseback. He had fought against both, but it would be hard to say that he had seized a clear victory in either case. From here on, when he was up against opponents like them, how should fight them?

At the outset, Orba assumed a two-stage attack with spear and sword. He wouldn't be able to match them in a frontal attack with a spear. So he would hold the reins in his mouth and while he threw the spear with his right hand, he would use the momentum to draw the sword with his left and chain the thrusts.

He even practiced the movement. Of course, since he was under confinement, every kind of weapon had been confiscated from him and he could not really practice by wielding a sword. However, despite Orba's young age, he had a wealth of experience in practical fighting. Memories of a great many fights helped with the image training.

It's not bad but...

After he had repeated it enough for his breathing to quicken, Orba groped about for another method. It was difficult to freely handle a horse or a dragon with a weapon in both hands; and even more so if it became a chaotic mêlée. Besides, if he was wielding both weapons from the start, it would be easy to guess his intentions.

So keep the sword at the waist and start with the spear.

Orba stared intently at the darkness and the figure of the Red Dragon Moldorf loomed out of it. At a distance that was neither too far nor too close, he threw the spear. There was no need to do so with all his strength. On the contrary, in order to be able to smoothly execute his next move, it should be neither too strong nor too weak. Since it was Moldorf, he would easily repel the spear. Orba leaned forward and sprung his horse onwards. Having knocked away the spear, Moldorf thrust out his own spear and galloped headlong towards the now empty-handed Orba. He could feel the wind whistling past his face.

Now –

For a split second, Orba seemed to fall forward then drew the sword at his waist.

The horses passed by each other. With a sweeping stroke to the torso, Moldorf was falling from the horse - His mental image could get to that point.

What was important here was that the movement of unsheathing the sword drawn from at his waist and the movement of striking his opponent's torso should truly be one and the same.

I shouldn't use a longsword.

The length of the short sword that he had received from his brother Roan would be about perfect.

Orba, alone, repeatedly practised bending at the knees and slouching from a forward position while drawing a sword. He was starting to sweat and while he was absorbed in moving his body without conscious thought, he was briefly able to forget his impatience and his regret. It was not a way of escaping from reality, but rather of driving away the negative emotions that were otherwise liable to take control of his body and mind.

And then, right after Bouwen Tedos had left, Orba, remaining behind, sat thinking in the chair.

The third day is it?

By his reckoning, if Shique had galloped onwards during the day, he should already have reached Apta. If he was to go there another three days from now, as promised in the letter, he would have to leave here before tomorrow nightfall at the very latest.

There wasn't so much as the shadow of a person in his surroundings. Sound had died out to the point of it being oppressive.

I made a stupid mistake.

The feelings that he had almost forgotten while moving around were unintentionally resurrected. He burned with a fierce regret and his head seemed to be seething.

He had set his resolve when he had written that letter. He did not need Shique to remind him of that. Because so far - all through the fight against Garda in the west - he had not thought about a future in which he would throw off the mask.

But where was I even looking back then?

He was always someone who made meticulous preparations, to the point that it irritated his comrades, yet this time he had been in such a rush to move forward that he had completely neglected to observe his surroundings. And as a result, he was now in a situation where he couldn't move at all.

I wasn't looking at anything. I didn't have a clear answer to who I was or who I wanted to be.

Without realising he was doing so, Orba took the mask in his hand.

What do I want to do?

Over the past three days, he had not once been able to unravel that problem. He could never come to a decision without having doubts.

Thinking of being the Crown Prince of Mephius again, of taking back that face was –

To stop the war with Taúlia. But what then? Continue as Crown Prince? Plan to get involved in all the wars in this world? Pretend that I can create a world where nobody is ever sad and nobody ever loses their life?

Even though I'm no Badyne believer.

I –

Had wanted to become a hero.

Leading an army of ten thousand, guiding his country to victory, that was the kind of hero he had yearned to be. The kind of existence that would be talked about in future histories along with splendid illustrations.

"Hah," Orba suddenly stood up and exhaled sharply. He nearly pitched forward from the left-over momentum and next drew the invisible sword at his waist and swung it horizontal line.

Ha –

"Ha ha ha."

If there had been someone assimilated into the shadows, closely observing Orba inside that room, they might have wondered if he had finally become mentally unhinged.

Having burst out laughing, Orba rolled on the floor, then looked up towards the ceiling as he repeatedly hit the ground with his fist in a fit of mirth.

Who was he?

He had continued to ask that since early childhood.

His older brother, Roan, had said that no one could know something like that.

His childhood friend, Alice, had said that something like that was stupid.

And then, a bold fourteen-year-old princess from Garbera had asked Orba himself – *Orba, who am I?*

Orba chortled uncontrollably for a while then, after his laughing fit ended, he suddenly went still as he looked up at the ceiling.

"It's stupid," a short whisper fell from his parched lips. "You're right, Alice. It's stupid, something like that."

He closed his eyes.

It was impossible to say who recurrently appeared in his thoughts, nor what scenes or from when and where.

Orba suddenly threw both legs up in the air and then, in the same breath, lifted his body as they swung back to the ground.

I'll do it.

My opponent in this fight is Guhl. That bastard. The people, the future, like I care about that now.

You who would take everything away from me, you who would once again burn the people I know. That's it. That's enough.

PART 2

As the rumours about Orba spread further and further, a great many people descended upon Bouwen Tedos to plead for mercy for him.

“If you’re already getting this worked up because of a baseless rumour, what will you do when Mephius starts an actual information war?”

Most of them went away when Bouwen rebuked them, but there were some among them who could not be ignored. The commander of Helio’s dragoons, Lasvius, and the Blue and Red Dragons of Kadyne. Both parties had sent a letter. Although, ostensibly, they took the stance that “this news is unreliable”, the contents were in effect a petition

Or at any rate, above his full formal signature, Lasvius had written that:

... while granted that there may be certain circumstances, as His Highness Rogier Helio looks forward to meeting Orba again sometime in the future, we remain in the expectation that he will be treated with leniency.

While the Twin Dragons of Kadyne asserted that:

...our lady, Princess Lima Khadein, is greatly concerned that, at this time of invasion by Mephius, something unfortunate may happen to Orba as he is Mephian. We firmly believe that we will hereafter laugh with the princess over her utterly groundless fears.

When Bouwen showed him the two notes, Ravan Dol laughed. And laughed so much that he choked on the tobacco fumes, which caused his back to shake and, for a moment, he blacked out from the pain.

“Well,” by the time he spoke, it had been quite a while since he had run his eyes over the letters, “and the third one?” He asked.

“Eh?”

“There wasn’t any letter? So it was said to you first-hand?”

“... Yes,” Bouwen reluctantly admitted.

There had been one more person who had gone to see Bouwen to verify the rumours

that they had heard about Orba.

Esmena Bazgan herself.

When he was informed of it, the strategist spoke again –

"Whether he can make a move at this time or not, there's no doubt that man is troublesome. Until our liege returns, the only thing to do is to keep him discreetly locked up."

"What do you think about this affair of a secret message?"

"That man's actions are far too baffling for it merely being a matter of colluding with Mephius. What should I do in a situation like this? I'll think about what to do. Right, now I'll stop worrying about it."

Bouwen could only sigh in answer. Ravan's eyes were shining brightly. They were burning with intent because life was worth living again now that he had found someone new, besides Ax, to play the role of the student; but Bouwen himself did not realize that at all.

"At any rate, we've extended our forces along the border and are already on lookout against Mephius. Natokk is strengthening the watch on the inside. So there's harm. So I left it. The other side will definitely make a move. But then," he waved the two letters with a flutter, "there is movement from another direction. I was expecting it, but it goes beyond what I had thought."

"You were expecting it?"

"Yes, I'm the one who spread the rumour about Orba."

"Master," Bouwen was taken aback.

According to what the old strategist explained, he had not taken part in the battle in which Garda had been subjugated, nor had he been able to afterwards assess the situation in the various western countries with his own eyes. And so, as he had not been able to gauge Orba's influence first-hand, he had acted in order to be able to measure it.

"If it were only small, any problem caused would soon disappear by just leaving him

locked up as is. If it were large, we would need to carefully consider how and when to use him."

Bouwen felt depressed but, as he still had something other than the letters to tell the old man, he rallied his energy. Above all else, this other communication proved that everything was going according to the old man's predictions.

"Orba says he wishes to see you, Master. Maybe he will reveal everything then."

"Oh, would you force out an old man whose legs cannot stand?"

"It cannot be helped. I implore your assistance."

As he lowered his head, it was the first time that Bouwen felt like hating the old strategist whom he had always loved and respected. It was the same sort of feeling that Ax Bazgan often had.

Ravan headed towards the room where Orba was locked up as fast as his legs would carry him. His back was bent crookedly and his gait was clumsy, as he was still unaccustomed to walking with a cane. Armed guards escorted him on all sides, but when they inadvertently stretched out a hand as Ravan seemed about to stumble, the old man shot them fierce glares.

He endured the humiliation until they finally arrived, then Ravan ordered everyone to clear out of the room. The door was locked shut and the soldiers stood guard outside it.

The old strategist and the young hero faced each other from either side of the table.

"I believe this is the first time we meet face-to-face, Sir Orba."

"..."

"Oh? Did you not call me here because you had something you wished to talk about? If you have no business with me, I'll be leaving. I only have a short time left in this world and cannot afford to waste it."

"I," Orba spoke, looking straight at Ravan who was leaning his weight on a cane to support his back. "I would like you to allow me to go to Mephius."

"To Mephius?"

"Yes."

"And what would you do there?"

"There is a general that I am acquainted with in Apta. I also know his personality well. If I can win him over, this war might be stopped before it begins."

"Oh? Well you were a Mephian gladiator. It's not so strange that you would be acquainted with a general but still, you're naive."

"Naive?"

"This situation won't change from no more than the feelings of a single general. The one who issued the command was Emperor Guhl Mephius himself. By all accounts, this war is being positioned as revenge for the crown prince. Quite the slogan. Because of that, the raised swords cannot be returned to their sheaths unless the emperor himself decides upon it. In those circumstances, winning over a single general would only at best allow us to buy some time."

"Guhl Mephius does not have faith in his retainers, and his retainers in turn no longer have faith in him. If even a single general opposes him and raises the banner of righteousness, there will be many who will go along with him."

"Even so."

"I am being naïve?"

"Exactly. You talk as though you are well-acquainted with Mephius' internal situation, but you demonstrate no basis for that. In actual fact, when there was that disturbance in Mephius and that man Zaat rose in revolt, no one followed him. From what I can see, Guhl was able to skilfully pull the country together. Although the way he does so is practically through a reign of terror, his ability to bind the country together without raising any turmoil is undeniable."

"Zaat had no unifying force. Nor did he brandish any great cause."

"So according to what you're saying, this general you know has the unifying force to be able to overthrow the emperor's rule? What's his name?"

"Rogue Saian. There is also a high chance that Odyne Lorgo, who is with him at Apta, would support him."

"I've heard of those names. Indeed, they are both outstanding generals. Even so, the chance of setting off an avalanche is pitifully low. As expected, it would lead to no more than stalling for time. Well, that would be one way. Our side could think about how to interfere using the opportunity of the enemy's internal quarrels. It might be better to do so than not."

"No. I would like the west to refrain from interfering unnecessarily."

"What did you say?"



"I will not tolerate a single soldier from either side crossing the border beyond this point. Is what I said."

"You will not tolerate it?"

"Indeed."

"You talk very grandly. Then I'll ask: who are you? You know Mephian generals, have detailed knowledge of Mephius' internal situation and are also giving both it and Taúlia orders for self-restraint."

Ravan glared at Orba's mask as though he could see through the iron but Orba for his part was calm.

"The point you are asking about is something an old master like yourself should already have understood, is it not?"

"What did you say?"

"Or do you really not know? A man such as you, Ravan Dol, the feared strategist of Taúlia?" his voice carried clear mockery.

In that moment, Orba undoubtedly made a mistake in his handling of the old man. Ravan Dol's gaze instantly relaxed, he returned to his usual easy-going expression and rose from his chair in a leisurely fashion.

"You act the great man. But that's quite enough and I, Ravan Dol, do not have time to play second fiddle to you."

He snapped his fingers to summon the guards.

The door unlocked and several soldiers with hawk-like features came into sight. Ravan silently passed through the entranceway.

"Master Ravan." When a voice called out to him from behind, the old strategist did not halt his steps. He ordered the soldiers to close the door.

The door made a heavy sound but just as it started to swing shut, he heard him say,

"It seems that the war fan was returned safely."

Ravan stopped suddenly. Orba continued –

"I heard about Raswan Bazgan's uprising. Thinking about it, I feel relieved that it was returned with the right timing. If someone as anti-Mephius as Raswan had taken the throne, it would have been a problem for me too."

Ravan stretched out his hand. Just before the door could close, he slipped back past it through the gap. His face expressionless, he once more gave the soldiers the order to withdraw.

When the door sounded shut, Ravan strode towards Orba. When he was close enough to him to feel his breath on his face, he said,

"Take off the mask."

Orba did not respond. But beneath the mask, he smiled. Staring at him from straight on, Ravan opened his eyes wide and changed his words,

"Please, is it not possible for you to remove the mask?"

Orba's smile widened and anger immediately suffused Ravan's face. And then that fury melted like ice.

Some time had passed.

"No wonder," said Ravan.

The iron mask was placed on the table.

Ravan whispered again, "no wonder." As always, the old man wore an expression overflowing with detachment from worldly concerns, but there was a slight tremor in his dark brown hands.

"... Why did you not reveal your face from the start? It would have been far more effective than running through a hundred words."

"I figured that suddenly revealing my face would be more likely to increase suspicion," Orba gave a slight shrug. "Besides, Taúlia has only just been at war with a sorcerer like Garda. I was also worried that I might be accused of using sorcery."

"So you even know about Garda."

"Strategist... Strategist.... who was it that killed Garda was?"

"Ah, oh. Yes, that's right..." Ravan nodded repeatedly, completely unlike a cunning strategist. Then he sighed deeply. "It's not that the thought didn't cross my mind. But it was just too... It was just too ridiculous. I am getting old. Although I tell myself not to be blinded by common sense, I was caught by it at the pivotal point. It was the same in Apta that time. You... No, *Your Highness*, you bombed your own fortress as though ridiculing my predictions."

"..."

"Certainly, if you were to issue an order to the generals, you might well be able to alter the present state of affairs. But it is a dangerous gamble. Mephius might be engulfed in the fires of civil war."

"We will have to do what we can to prevent those fires from spreading. And to that end, Taúlia's – no, the west's cooperation will be necessary," said Orba. His way of speaking and his tone of voice were the same as when he was wearing the mask yet he somewhat projected the atmosphere of a different person.

"Of course," Ravan Dol nodded as before but, from that single gesture, it was clear that his manner had changed from what it had been earlier. "To avoid a war with Mephius, we will demonstrate our power to the utmost."

"You will trust me?"

"Huh?" Ravan opened his eyes wide in bemusement. With an abruptness unbefitting of an old man, his expression turned strangely humorous. "Yep. After this, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to see something as mysterious or suspicious ever again. At a time like this, 'Prince', what do you think I will do?"

"Well now..."

"I will stop worrying." Ravan laughed, displaying unexpectedly white and healthy

teeth. "Above all else, this situation is interesting. It is worth gambling the humble head of a single old man."

"I am obliged to you."

"Then, will you be leaving for Apta?"

"Immediately, if possible."

"I understand," Ravan assented.

After Orba had once again put on the mask, Ravan clapped his hands and called for the soldiers to come. After an exchange of no more than a few minutes, Orba was readily released.

Once the soldiers had hurried off to make their report, the two were left alone once more.

"We cannot wait for long," said Ravan. "There are the war preparations that have been made up until now. After Your Highness has left, and if it looks as though Mephius is once more going to invade, we will of course defend ourselves to the utmost and will think about how to attack if we see any opportunity to do so."

"That's fine."

"In that case, can we say that Orba, the hero in the iron mask, died?"

"Killed by Mephius or executed because he was plotting betrayal, whichever you prefer." You would not have thought that Orba was talking about himself from the way he spoke, but then, "however..."

"However?"

"Princess Esmena greatly supported me from behind, so please tell her the truth, and thank her for her help."

"I will certainly do so."

Having been released from confinement, Orba appeared at Taúlia's eastern gate just before the day grew dark. He was on horseback and the hood of the cloak he wore concealed his eye-catching mask. At his waist, he had a brand-new sword and his usual short sword.

He was not leaving alone. In exchange for cancelling the order to monitor Orba's unit, Ravan had given Natokk new instructions to choose a few men and have them escort Orba.

"Accompany him to the Mephian border. You are not to let him suffer a single scratch."

When he received that order, Natokk was naturally somewhat suspicious but he had absolute faith in Ravan Dol. He assumed that he had some plan in mind.

Moreover, and also at Ravan's order, by the time Orba departed for Apta, another group had already gone ahead and left Taúlia in a cloud of dust. It had several people locked in a cage that was being pulled by dragons.

At any rate, Orba was given six guards, all of which were riding horses. One of them looked up at the sky which was turning dark and lit a pine torch. When he approached Orba, the flames were reflected in the mask under the hood.

"We going?"

As he did not know what kind of attitude he should adopt, his speech was rough. This was a swordsman who was a hero and who was also suspected of treason.

"Yeah," that self-same Orba simply nodded once.

Each of them whipped their horses and broke into a run. In the sky overhead, one star then two started to twinkle.

From under the hood and behind the mask, Orba's eyes were fixed in the direction straight ahead.

Their gaze was set on Apta.

The fortress that he himself had once received.

And also the land that he himself had once abandoned.

The time to take it back was approaching.

PART 3

A group of Zerdian pedlars were walking along a road that branched off from the highway.

Although that was certainly how they appeared, and the horse-carts were carrying packages, an onlooker would, however, have definitely noticed an unusual sharpness in their eyes and behaviour.

They were more than fifty and most of them were Zerdians, although none of them were currently living in the west. Instead they dwelt in the Dragon Gods' shrine in Solon, the capital of the west's current enemy, Mephius. When the elders had still resided in the mountains at the border, they had been the warriors charged with guarding them and thus were familiar with the surrounding terrain.

The twenty following behind them were Mephian soldiers.

They were the party that had been sent from Apta to search for Vileena. The Mephians wore tense expressions. When they had been told that they would be crossing the border north of the River Yunos, they had wondered – *Are you serious* – but the Zerdians did not hesitate. They had previously split into small groups and had separated, probably to go and get information from members of the same mountain tribes as themselves, but now they had stopped dividing their numbers and, after everyone had regrouped, they advanced with firm steps.

Moreover, the Mephians were given a humiliating task when they crossed the border. They were made to strip to the waist and had their hands bound by rope. This was so that when they were challenged by the garrison guards, they were able to give the excuse that "we caught soldiers who fled from the battlefield." They completed the story by explaining that they were going to sell them as battlefield slaves. Guards stopped them two or three times as they proceeded along the border but, since Zerdian merchants were unquestionably burly and bold, everyone believed them.

Since they were dealing with Zerdians, the Mephian soldiers suspected on more than just one or two occasions that they were being led into a trap, but they had received orders from General Narbal; besides, they could not see any advantage for the Zerdians to capture them anyway.

They travelled south down the River Yunos for about a week.

The Zerdians stopped.

There was a village in sight. The houses were like stone bulges rising from the gently undulating ground.

"Is it there?" the Zerdian who was leading – the man called Kiril whom Nabarl had met with – pointed when he saw the village. A Zerdian who was slightly older than the rest of those chosen to be part of the search party nodded.

Which meant that Princess Vileena was there.

Kiril scratched his pointed goatee.

"Would it be best to eradicate it so as to not leave an undying grudge?"

"Eradicate what?" One of the Mephian soldiers berated him. "That village?"

"Don't be stupid," another one of them objected. "We just need to tell them that we've come to fetch the princess from Mephius. They won't particularly put up any resistance."

"This is enemy territory."

"I-In which case, it'll be fine if you Zerdians pretend to be on a mission from Taúlia. We'll lend you our armour and weapons. If you disguise yourselves as Taúlian soldiers..." Realizing that the others were serious, the Mephian soldier made a hurried suggestion.

They should avoid unnecessary fights. As Kiril had said, they were in enemy territory. An uproar might attract the attention of nearby enemies.

Then –

"Over there," a Zerdian who was around the same age as Kiril pointed to the only road leading to the village.

Kiril stared hard then in a harsh voice said –

"Your suggestion is rejected."

A line of people was approaching the village. Judging from their appearance, the armed group was undoubtedly Taúlian soldiers.

Vileena had already spent eight days in the village. In the time since her waking up, she had recovered to the point of helping the Jayce family with their work.

With that said, the work that Vileena could help with was very limited. In the morning, she fed the chickens then received fodder from Rone, after he returned from the mountains, and took care of the horses. She also drew water from the village well and carried it to Rone's wife who was working in the fields.

She had once taken a meal to the man who slept in the detached room. She had heard beforehand that Rone had saved the man's life, but he was lying with his back towards the door and took absolutely no notice of Vileena. He sometimes let out a voice as though he was having a nightmare.

Although she was limited in what she could do, the time passed in a blink of an eye while she worked. She had often heard Garberan nobles go on about how "when I left the city, I went to do some work in a village and it was truly leisurely, like a completely different world from this bustling court," but she had always thought that was an outright lie.

In the evening, she ate her meal and then spent the time before the sun had completely set with Layla.

Layla loved Vileena like a real little sister. Each of them had their own circumstances, and they never talked together about their pasts, but from that Layla was able to understand all the more that Vileena carried a wound in her heart.

On the evening of the eighth day.

"Your hair is really so beautiful, Luna," Layla marvelled as she combed Vileena's hair from behind.

'Luna' was the fake name that Vileena was using.

Except in the higher-class families, Zerdians did not have custom of bathing in hot water. In this village also, as there was a river nearby, people would go and wash themselves in it or would take water in a bucket to wash their hair and body with. At first, Vileena had been embarrassed to be naked in front of another person, however had no choice but to go along with it since her life was dependant on others. At times like these, Layla took care of Vileena like a little sister.

"There aren't any Mephians nor, although this rude of me, Zerdians with hair this beautiful. You're..."

Layla suddenly fell silent. She felt bad about prying thoughtlessly. Although Vileena was grateful for all the consideration she was receiving, it was also painful.

Layla smoothed over the situation by talking about various funny stories that had happened in the village. While doing so, she took the time to carefully clean Vileena's hair.

Suddenly reminded of her mother and Theresia, Vileena looked up through the window to the sky that was studded with innumerable small lights.

It's all so far away.

Her chest felt constricted from the overwhelming homesickness.

Garbera, the country of meadows. A country defended by gallant knights and fast airships. As she vividly recalled the royal court, where she had lived until she was fourteen, with its familiar paths and the flower gardens that they each had led to, Vileena's eyelids grew hot.

How she would run away from her studies and play about here and there. Theresia would chase after her every time but Vileena had hiding places all over the palace. There were also the times when she would go to where the adults were working, but the cooks, the gardeners, the blacksmiths, and everyone working on the air carriers were all Vileena's allies; so when Theresia came calling, they would feign ignorance. When her brother Zenon was at court, they would often play tag or have duels with toy swords.

And then there was also her grandfather, Jeorg. How she looked forward to going to have fun once a twice a season at the royal villa where her grandfather lived.

Grandfather...

The heat behind her eyelids became unbearable so Vileena closed her eyes and let the flowing water wash away the tears she shed.

She wondered if the people from her native country heard that she had turned traitor on Mephius and betrayed secret information. How had her grandfather reacted when he had heard? Had he applauded her, exclaiming that he expected nothing less from a daughter of Garbera and his granddaughter, or had he lamented that his grandchild had been swayed by the feelings of the moment and had hurt their national interests?

Thinking about it was to no avail. She had already long since passed through that inner conflict and reached her decision. But saying that she had reached a decision did not contradict the fact that she still had doubts.

Perhaps because she had noticed Vileena's feelings, Layla invited her to her own bedroom that evening and talked with her for a long time after the lights had died out, their pillows lined up side by side. She talked about some of the young men from among the villagers. Even though 'Lennus from next door' was younger than Layla, having the unsophisticated boy look at her warmly left her feeling not only half embarrassed but also half proud.

"But doesn't it look like you're going to steal him? At any rate, since you arrived he's constantly been looking at you."

"Something like that..." Vileena denied it, feeling uncomfortable. She was not used to this kind of girly conversation.

Layla giggled unintentionally.

"Don't worry about troubling anyone. Look for someone good, Luna. But you have to tell me if you find him." Layla gave Vileena a light nudge to the side with her elbow. "Marrying someone, having your own child... That happiness can definitely be found anywhere. Even if the culture and values are different, even in a different land and different country, that's the normal course, definitely." Layla's voice was almost a whisper.

That kind of life – was probably possible, Vileena thought. If she had not been raised in the royal palace... if she had been born as an ordinary town girl, although her unruly personality might have caused trouble for her parents when she was little, but as she

grew into an adult she would also have grown conscious of the opposite sex, spending entire nights gossiping about it with other girls her age. And then, before long, she would have married someone, becoming a parent with a child of her own in her arms...

Layla's words, which were saying – *you can stay here forever if you want*, echoed a voice in her heart.

Vileena was afraid of the her who almost wanted that kind of life; and if her stay here was prolonged any longer, that desire would surely grow stronger.

I was born in the royal family.

That was a fact that would not change, no matter what kind of life she hoped for.

Since she was born in the royal family, she had a duty. Even if she barely had any power.

The face of her grandfather, whom she had remembered earlier, once again came to her mind. That of her father did too.

There was also one more in Vileena's heart: the face of a young man who, despite coming from an exalted lineage, was looked down upon by the people of his country and neglected even by his own father, but who had overcome every hardship.

And so she decided, as she greeted the morning of the ninth day, that after working until dusk, she would broach the matter with the Jayce family during the evening meal.

Tomorrow, I will leave.

Taúlia or Apta. The time to make a decision was approaching.

Vileena turned her back on Layla's kindness and, as though that back was being pushed, she made her decision.

The end of that day came in the blink of an eye and a certain group was drawing near to the village.

As though they had been waiting for Vileena's decision, those figures appeared like the embodiment of the future she had chosen. Wearing light armour and armed with slightly curved swords as well as old-fashioned guns, the ones advancing on horseback were the group of thirty that had been despatched from Taúlia. Before long, about half of them were waiting at the ready outside the village while the remaining half were having a talk with the village chief.

"We heard that there was a girl who looks as though she is from a foreign country in this village."

When he heard what their business was, the village chief thought that the girl had, after all, proved to be a cause of trouble; but the soldiers simply said that they had "come to fetch her" and the air about them did not make him feel that there would be a fight.

"Please wait a while," for the time being, the village chief seemed about to step out of his house.

Since he could not grasp the situation, he thought that he should ask the girl's opinion but –

"Ah!" He heard the soldiers near the house raise a clamour.

The moment he himself exited out of his house, the cause of that was right before his eyes.

Vileena had personally stepped forward. Before the confused Jayce family that was accompanying her, she called out to the leader of the search party.

"I have caused you trouble."

"The only thing that matters is that you are safe," said the captain with heartfelt relief. "We were saved thanks to you, Princess. If we had lost our benefactress, we would have been able to face neither our ancestors nor our descendants. By good fortune, we have received the honour of being able to come escort you, Princess; you who stand equal with the hero who slew Garda."

The villagers were speechless.

Vileena politely expressed her gratitude to the village chief and then walked up to the

Jayce family. Even though they looked about to speak, she did not know what to say. So Vileena simply placed a hand to her chest like a Garberan court aristocrat and bowed deeply.

Included in it was the meaning of leaving behind the her that was not the princess of Garbera.

Rone and his wife exchanged glances. Layla could only let her mouth hang open in amazement.

“Now’s a good time,” said Kiril at the same moment.

They were lying low not far from the village. He had chosen several of his men, as well as the Mephian soldiers, to follow him. Then he had given separate orders to the remaining Zerdians and had them go off and do something else.

The place where Kiril and the others were lying hidden seemed to be the public cemetery and, from a hill of densely piled up earth, they had an excellent view of the Taúlian group as well as Princess Vileena.

“A good time?”

“To attack them.”

The Mephians gazed at Kiril in horror.

“Don’t be stupid. If we come out now, the princess might get hurt. We should draw back instead and place soldiers ahead in ambush along the way they’ll be going. Once they’re far enough away from the village, we can attack them by surprise and...”

“There are currently only a few enemy soldiers. We should be able to recover the princess with a swift surprise attack.”

“You’ve gotta be joking.”

“If you *won’t* do it, I will *make* you do it.” Both his eyes gleaming strangely, Kiril raised

his hand.

In the next instant, gunshots resounded. The Mephians had no time to reign in their surprise.

The men that Kiril had left behind had crept up to the Taúlian soldiers waiting near the entrance of the village and, at his signal, had started shooting. After firing first, one then two volleys, they immediately retreated. Several soldiers who had escaped from becoming casualties hurriedly threw themselves on horseback and gave chase.

“E-Enemies.”

“An attack!”

It was a trap to divide the soldiers in two.

The mood in the village did a complete about-turn.

The people, who had been gathering in the area in front of the village chief's house, all screamed and, while pulling the women and children by the hand, started fleeing towards the houses.

While the Mephian soldiers were in shock, Kiril once more waved his hand.

More gunshots. This time, they came from close by.

Smoke rose from the walls and surrounding ground of the houses. One man, who had been slow to escape, was hit in the stomach and folded without a sound. Kiril's men spread out around the village.

And they were not only armed with guns, as the sound of arrows also whizzed over people's heads.

With fire at their tips, the arrows pierced the roofs of the houses and the piled-up stacks of hay. Smoke and flames started to rise from all over the village. The chaos grew even worse.

In the instant that those flames brilliantly lit up the side of his face, Kiril suddenly stood up and started racing down the hill. As he did so, he shouted –

“Mephian soldiers! I’m being chased by Mephian soldiers. Please help me!”

And there were undoubtedly armed soldiers from Mephius lying undercover where he pointed.

This is ridiculous!

More than being surprised or angry, the Mephians were completely dumbfounded.

From among the mothers and children, who were trying to escape from the gunshots and the flames, several of the Taúlian soldiers, as well as a number of ardent young men armed with hatchets and hoes, rushed one after another to where the Mephian soldiers were hiding.

They closed the distance before they could escape.

“Ngh!”

Unable to endure it, one of them rose up drawing his sword and sliced at the villager who was in the lead. He had a remarkably pockmarked face and was at an age where he could still be called a boy. The arm in which he held his hoe was severed halfway and sent flying in the sky.

“Lennus!” Layla screamed, but of course, the name meant nothing to the Mephian soldier.

Further screams and roars exploded with ear-splitting force.

Vileena instinctively held back Layla as she was about to run to the crouching boy whose arm had been cut off.

Thrown off balance and forced to fight back, the Mephians could not fathom Kiril’s intentions.

Having used the Mephian soldiers as bait, Kiril and his men were easily able to get closer to the princess. But it would, of course, be difficult to get her out of the village. Which was why the Mephians could not understand what he was thinking. The answer however was simple.

Kiril did not intend to get her out. He would draw up to her in the midst of the chaos

and would kill her. Furthermore, it was not necessary for they themselves to survive. They were to accomplish their duty as they were ordered to, and die as they were ordered to. That was all they existed for.

Such fun.

Every time he kicked away from the ground, the distance to Vileena shrank. Kiril's usually apathetic face was now radiant and lively.

Just as that Mephian had said, of course it would have been easier to take down the Taúlian soldiers if they had shot at them once they had left the village, and they certainly would have been able to capture the princess as well.

But that wouldn't have been any fun.

As he felt the ether that was rising up from the many dead stream across his face, he yearned for death. Because then he would be called to the Dragon Gods. He was a pious believer who had offered them many deaths and much ether.

While paying careful attention to what was going on behind, and pretending to flee, Kiril measured by eye the distance between himself and Vileena. He put a hand to his breast. What he withdrew was a smallish, V-shaped battle-boomerang. It was mainly composed of the weightless metal made from refining dragon bones and was a weapon for assassination.

With it in hand, he made a large swing in an upwards motion and threw it.

The air had become so hazy that it was hard to see anything anymore and the boomerang was swallowed by the sky. From there, it drew an arc and returned, cleaving through the wind. He had calculated that it would strike Vileena's head perfectly.

At that moment, Layla pushed Vileena aside to race forward but stumbled to the ground. Surprised, Vileena reached out her hand and leaned down. The boomerang sliced by above her head. A few strands of hair scattered in mid-air.

Kiril clicked his tongue but as the startled Vileena turned to look back, she was the very picture of defencelessness. He wiped all expression from his face and started running straight towards her.

“Princess, this way!”

The captain of the search party broke in between them. Naturally, he had not seen through Kiril’s scheme and was planning to lead the princess to a safe place because of the attack from Mephius. This was to earn him harm.

Kiril ran past him. Blood spurted from the captain’s neck and he toppled sideways. A dagger was clasped in Kiril’s hand. Its tip dripping blood as though to sketch a red line behind him, he drew closer to Vileena.

“Who!” Vileena cried. But she had no weapon at hand. She was going to dodge Kiril’s charge when, at that moment, she stumbled over Layla who was crouched at her feet.

Vileena fell, her body covering Layla’s. Instinctively, she tried to at least protect that life. The warmth that Vileena felt against her own body was the same warmth that had been protecting her these past several days.

Seeing a perfect opportunity, Kiril raised his blade.

CHAPTER 6

RETURN

PART 1

At around that time, a great many people were gathered at Apta's dragon training ground.

Thick stakes were being driven one-by-one into the ground of that open space. Each of the more than fifty stakes would soon be used to crucify^[3] someone. The members of the prince's former Imperial Guards.

By the time Rogue Saian noticed the commotion, the preparations were already more than half complete. Odyne, who had been relaxing in his room, also caught wind of it and came rushing along with him. The two of them had sternly questioned Nabarl about it, but Apta's current commander-in-chief coolly replied that,

"We will shortly be performing an execution here."

"You've arbitrarily decided that on your own?"

"It will not be all of them. As His Majesty will want information, some of them will be spared. For the rest, it is a question of troop morale. With the present uproar, the soldiers were getting irritated that it was taking so long to be resolved. Publicly executing the pack that conspired with Taúlia to assassinate the prince will raise their spirits."

The uproar was that a dragon handled by Hou Ran had mauled some of Nabarl's men to death. Rogue's expression grew bitter.

"When we asked her about it, she explained that it was protecting her. So far, there is no evidence that they're connected with Taúlia. Are you not being overly-hasty?"

"Were there any witnesses who could support that woman's excuse? That's right, there were none. I believe my subordinates' report. If you were in my position, you would too."

“However...”

“Besides which, are you calling for evidence? His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, was shot and lost his life. The Imperial Guards originally blamed that crime on General Oubary, however the general has already been released in Solon and His Majesty has declared that it was Taúlia’s doing. General Saian, do not speak so thoughtlessly. Your words just now could be taken as direct criticism of His Majesty.”

The colour of blood rose to Rogue’s face.

While arguing down the veteran general, Nabarl had been curt from beginning to end. In point of fact, the matter did not interest him. Executing the Imperial Guards was, after all, no more than something to be added to his justifications for having lost the battle, and was not something that would be particularly productive.

Before many more days had passed, the troops of each of the twelve generals would probably be despatched to Apta and, if that happened, there was no guarantee that he would remain the supreme commander. Nabarl dearly wanted to lead another assault against Taúlia with his current military power. The execution was something like a ritual. It meant both wiping the slate clean of his defeat as well as stoking the soldiers up.

“I have lost my cherished soldiers,” Nabarl closed his eyes. “There would have been a meaning to their lives being cut down on the battlefield, but instead they were mauled to death by a dragon being controlled by a female slave. How can I explain it to their families who are awaiting their return? Please do not try to stop me, Sir Rogue. As we are now, this is something which is necessary. There must certainly be an execution along with the dawn.”

When he was told that it would be at dawn, Rogue closed his mouth.

According to the letter, it was at about that time that Crown Prince Gil Mephius would arrive. This allowed Rogue to take a gamble.

If he comes, good. But if he doesn’t...

“Do you believe it?” asked Odyne who was walking beside him after they had left Nabarl.

“Believe what?”

“What we were discussing.”

Rogue Saian had shown Odyne the letter that Shique had delivered. His reaction had not been very different from Rogue’s own. He had been surprised but not flustered. Nor had he stated what he intended to do with regards to it.

As they walked shoulder-to-shoulder, Odyne cautiously lowered his voice.

“Isn’t it because you believe it that you backed down for the time being?”

“Well...”

Despite it being the dead of night, the figures of a multitude of people could be seen by the light of the fires that had been lit in the iron baskets all around the training grounds. They were there to watch the executions.

“What does ‘well’ mean?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know either. But... whether it’s true or not, I’m grateful for that letter.”

“Grateful?” Odyne’s eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected words.

Rogue Saian smiled. “It gave me the impetus to reach a decision.”

“ ... ”

“Although I was dissatisfied with all sorts of things about Mephius’ current state, I was not going to do anything about it. I made excuses about already being too old and that it was a job for the young. I didn’t even realise it myself.” As they walked, Rogue narrowed his eyes as though he was looking at something dazzling. “And so, without that letter, I too might have led my men over the border with Taúlia in the end. But thanks to it – and whether I believe it or not is separate matter – I decided to wait the three days as a Mephian warrior. And I will give my answer having thought about it as a warrior. I was made to realise it... Odyne, if at dawn the prince does not appear, then...”

“Then?”

“I will stop the execution. Even if I have to strike down Nabarl himself.”

“General!”

As though expecting to suddenly be shot at, Odyne cautiously swept his gaze around their surroundings. There were several soldiers standing sentry nearby but those words did not appear to have reached them. Rogue himself was still smiling.

“As long as there is life left within me, I will not let a single soldier cross the border. His Majesty will naturally be furious. But I am proud of belonging to the Saian House and we have supported the country as Mephian warriors from generation to generation. If that self-same Saian House demonstrates its military power for the last time, even His Majesty will become conscious of something.”

“Sir Rogue...”

“You are young. You do not need to follow me. For me, my men are like my family. They are of the same mind as me. But I do not intend to involve any but my family in this.”

“Even I...” Odyne was about to declare that he shared the same will, but stopped just short. No matter how much antipathy he felt towards the emperor, who was so lacking in righteousness, if he aligned himself with Rogue’s actions, then not only would he himself be in danger, but his family back in Solon would be too. The way Rogue had clearly spoken of his “family”... in other words, he was prepared to sacrifice them.

Odyne’s breath was taken away when thinking of his own hesitations compared to the depth of the veteran general’s resolve.

Perhaps because he noticed Odyne’s thoughts, Rogue laughed cheerfully. “Before this, we were not particularly close, but I am glad to have made a friend after coming here. But you will live. If all those who share this same heart are killed in action, Mephius will be covered in even greater darkness than it is now. So you will live. I want you to live and endure as you bide your time. Then maybe, if there are any who feel that my actions held some righteousness, you will be able to win them over to your side. Even one would count as a victory.”

Rogue’s face was calm as he explained a plan that worked on the premise of his own death. Perhaps he was feeling brighter now that he had gotten all that off his chest, as Rogue’s face looked refreshed while he thumped Odyne on the shoulder.

“Mephius’ future is bright. Don’t you think so? Right, this evening, let’s drink together. I won’t let you say no. The men are kicking up a ruckus while they wait too. Right, let’s

go.”

The two generals left the training grounds behind them.

When Odyne fleetingly looked back, he felt as though the stakes illuminated by the fires were like the gravestones for Mephius itself, and shuddered.

Seven figures on horseback raced on, torches held aloft. They had left from Taúlia.

Because these were times of war, units like these could be seen patrolling far and wide, even away from the cities. The soldiers were not only from Taúlia but also from Helio, Kadyne or Cherik. Orba’s face was concealed beneath his hood. He went unnoticed.

Although on the way they would stop by an airship relay base that also doubled as a camp for the guards, it would still take two days to reach the border. And near Apta there was the River Yunos as well. The group was mostly silent as they sped their horses onwards.

There was a lot to think about. The Taúlian soldiers had not been informed at all about what Orba was planning on doing; while Orba had the strong impression that he was riding hard along a road that he would never be able to turn back along, exactly as though he were racing along a bridge that was burning behind him.

And yet, he was not plunged into regret.

It’s a fight. A fight.

As proof of that, his blood was stirring.

The enemy is colossal.

Although he had gone through battle after battle, the enemy was much larger this time. So in order to fight against it, he would also have to be large.

One by one, he mentally went over the processes to achieve that. However there was not a single thing among them that he took for granted. He could only think of the

many pitfalls that laid along the path ahead.

Even that feeling of tension currently felt good to Orba.

The die has been cast. He was no longer wavering between this and that. Orba was never so lively as when he had reached the stage where there was nothing to do next but take action.

A day passed by as they went by the site the had been turned into a battlefield not long ago.

They took a nap at the relay's barracks then immediately left again. There were, of course, only men at that camp, but there had been an exception only about a week earlier. Someone who had also been a foreigner. But Orba did not know that.

As the day was dying and they were riding fast through the dusk –

“Oi, over there,” said one of the Taúlian soldiers.

When they looked, it seemed as if flames were rising from the side. Because it was in the same direction as the setting sun, they had not been noticeable before, but now that the burning rays of sunlight had dimmed, the riders could see the flame's light.

Upon asking, it seemed that there was a small village in that direction. The soldiers began to make a stir.

“It can't be an attack by Mephian forces?”

“There was no news about them crossing the border.”

“Could the bastards have sneaked up on the border guards?”

Each of them pulled on their reins and brought their horses to a standstill. Orba was no exception.

A village is being attacked.

His expression had changed under his hood. In his mind he saw flames rising from every house and people running between them, trying to escape. An army troop clad in black from head to toe chased after them. The screaming women and children who

were crushed under the horses' hooves, the young men whose heads were sent flying when tried to resist – one by one the images flashed by then faded. That time from his own childhood had overlapped with the present.

“What do we do?”

The Taúlian soldiers started a discussion in front of Orba.

“If it really is Mephian troops, it'll be impossible to get any closer to the border.”

“Let's return to the camp. We can notify Taúlia with the airships there.”

“First things first, I'll go check the situation. The rest of you stay here on standby and...”

The outcome was that the group would be split into three. Two would go towards the village to act as scouts and two more would return to the camp. The remaining three, Orba included, would stay where they were on standby, but –

“No,” Orba shook his head. “We'll get as close as we can to the border.”

“What?”

The Taúlian soldiers were aghast. Orba was already urging his horse onwards. At the sight of his arrogant behaviour, the youngest soldier in the group snarled.

“You're just going to be jumping into the enemy's arms. Mephius has already forded the Yunos.”

“There's no time.”

“Time. Time for what? We haven't been told anything. Even if it doesn't matter to you, that's one of our villages over there. That's...”

“If you're not coming then do whatever you want. I'm going ahead,” Orba flung at him and whipped his horse.

Leaving the soldiers behind, he travelled steadily forward. Under the swaying hood, his eyes gleamed sharply. He did not want to abandon the village either. He too was worried that Mephius might be occupying the border, but that was even more so a reason to hurry onwards.

On the other hand, the leader of the Taúlian soldiers he had left behind reached a decision.

“At any rate, we need to check the situation at the border.”

After giving each group, one heading towards the village and the other returning to camp, their respective orders, he then, with the youngest soldier in tow, chased after Orba.

“Tsk,” the young soldier reluctantly made his horse move its legs.

Orba was not going to look back.

A gunshot resounded in his ears.

It was not from some far off direction – in other words, it was not from the village. It was from close by.

He grabbed the sword at his waist.

A number of figures had suddenly jumped out from the side of the road.

A gunshot.

At the same time, Kiril leapt backwards.

“Don’t move.”

His smoking gun muzzle firmly fixed on Kiril, Rone Jayce walked towards him. They faced each other with the princess and Layla between them.

“Forget it.”

As he spoke, Kiril once again swept his arm in a wide movement. From it, a black shadow shot through the air. Rone instinctively stepped back and it flew over his head. Having seen it pass by, Rone was about to angrily pull the trigger when,

“Duck!” Vileena cried out in the same instant.

He realised just in time what the weapon that had been about to end his life was doing. His warrior instincts sprang back to life at the sharpness of that voice. He was originally a man who had sufficient enough skills to be chosen as one of the emperor’s own Imperial Guards. When Rone stooped, Kiril launched himself and broke into a run.

Rone adjusted the gun’s aim, but was too late.

A kick from Kiril’s long legs sent the weapon flying. Then, using the recoil from his action to whirl like an acrobat, he caught the boomerang in mid-air.

He landed behind Rone. At almost the same moment as the former Imperial Guard released the glint of a blade at his waist, Kiril swung the dagger he held in one hand, aiming for Rone’s back in the same movement. With a timing that was almost artistic, the swords collided.

Sparks flew.

Both turned towards the other. Their faces were close. They exerted their strength to break that balance. Rone had the advantage in both weapon and physique. He gradually overwhelmed Kiril with brute force.

Suddenly, Rone pitched forward. Kiril immediately relaxed his strength and crouched down, pivoted on his right foot and, as Rone started stumbling, tripped him to the ground.

“Father!”

His daughter’s voice ringing in his ears, Rone quickly rolled over as a blade drove after him. Twice, thrice, he narrowly dodged it but Kiril’s movements were ruthlessly precise and on the third time, the blade cornered him into a position from which he could no longer avoid it.

“Wait.”

Vileena.

Without anyone realising it, she had picked up the gun that had been kicked out of

Rone's hand and was standing to their side.

Kiril did not falter for a second. His sword swung down towards Rone's neck.

"Guh!"

He cried out like a bird of ill-omen and staggered back. A cloud of dust rose from the ground. The tip of his feet had almost been blown through.

Having fired the shot, Vileena narrowed the distance between them and once more put herself at the ready. Kiril's eyes filled with surprised admiration.

"You actually did it, Princess."

"You called me 'Princess'? Judging by your behaviour, you know who I am?"

"Of course. The third princess of Garbera, Vileena Owell. An exalted existence, the like of which there is no second in this world."

When he formally announced her name, Rone and Layla gasped. Vileena however had no attention to spare for them. Her heart was pounding. The stench of gunpowder filled her nose to the point of bringing tears to her eyes.

Abiding by her grandfather's instructions, and so as to be able to protect herself, Vileena had not failed to continue gun practice, but this was of course the first time she had shot at a human.

"Hmm," nevertheless, she raised her slender chin and her manner remained haughty to the last, "if you have business with me, then it has nothing to do with the villagers. Why did you do something like this?"

"For the sake of achieving my goal, I could not afford to choose my means..." Kiril's expression fleetingly turned sorrowful but, "...that would be a lie. I did it because it was fun."

"Fun?"

"Having gone out of our way to come this far, it would be boring if the only prey were small-fry Taúlian soldiers. If the battle isn't a maelstrom of screams and blood, the ether that humans release before dying won't be refined."



White-hot anger flared in Vileena's eyes. From the corner of her eye, she saw the tumbling corpse of a man who had been pierced in the abdomen by a Mephian soldier. While the youth whose arm had been cut off, and who was even now faint with agony, was certainly the one called Lennus who had given flowers to Layla.

"Scoundrel." Vileena voice sounded as though it could have cut him down. "Don't move. If you value your life, throw down your weapon and surrender with your companions."

"Since I don't value it, I'll be resisting you on that."

Kiril gave a wicked smile and flung the boomerang in a swift movement. Startled, Vileena shifted her eyes left and right and in that instant, Kiril broke into a sprint. Moving as fast as though he were flying, he cut down the distance in a heartbeat. When the princess realised it, she lifted the gun in front of her but it was too late. Kiril slammed his fist into her abdomen.

Vileena wordlessly crumpled to her knees. For a second, it felt as though all the oxygen had been snatched from her body. Kiril easily grabbed the gun from her shaking hands.

"You should pay close attention. There won't be a second sacrifice as noble as you. To enhance the quality, I'll have you hate and despair even more." Kiril licked his lips.

At precisely that moment, a Taúlian soldier raised his sword behind Kiril and aimed for him but the weapon that Kiril had thrown some time earlier came back, tearing through the wind, and hit the soldier, who was only a few steps behind him, in the back of his neck

Unconcerned by the blood that was gushing like a raging waterfall, Kiril smoothly pulled it out. Like a doll that had been tossed away, the soldier fell to the ground.

His victim's blood smeared on him like makeup, Kiril once more turned his eyes towards the Jayce father and child.

"Stay away!" Rone shouted, but not to Kiril. To his wife who, her face pale, was about to run to them. He himself stood to face Kiril, sword in hand.

Vileena could barely keep the two of them in sight. It was hard to breathe. Black shadows hung from her eyelids and if her consciousness slipped just a little bit more, the two figures would be engulfed in a wave of darkness. As a voice whispered to her that it would be more comfortable that way, she gritted her teeth and rejected it.

Damn it! – The resentful curses that the Garberan soldiers had sometimes spoken echoed in Vileena's heart.

Even though she was doing her utmost to stay conscious, she could not freely lift so much as a single finger. Unaware that drool was coming from her mouth and that her eyes were overflowing with tears, Garbera's third princess cursed her own powerlessness as she was unable to even move.

Always... always... At times like these, she was made to realise what an insignificant existence she was, good only to be knocked around without being able to do anything.

As the distance between the two narrowed, the feeling of oppression coming from the fire seemed to increase. Rone was on the verge of swinging his sword. But not because he was seizing an opening but because he could no longer bear the tension – in other words, Kiril had made him move. Even Vileena, an amateur, could see it. And just as she had imagined, Rone moved in a straight line which Kiril was easily able to dodge before burying his right hand into Rone's abdomen.

"Guh!"

A dagger stabbed deep into his belly, Rone grunted as he started to topple backwards. Kiril moved to hug his body close to prevent that from happening. Screams from Rone's wife and child echoed.

"Stop!"

The voice that only barely sprang from Vileena's lips pierced Kiril's ears more keenly than any other. He turned around with a somewhat surprised expression. In that time, Rone's body collapsed.

"My. You still have courage enough to speak." Though Kiril's eyes were once again filled with admiration, strange words followed. "Such a waste. Such a high-quality existence should be kept to milk ether or be of use to Lord Garda. It really is a waste, but it's an order, so there's no help for it."

"What are you..."

"Well, be sure to shed tears of blood as you watch in frustration." Kiril turned his back to Vileena. His complete disinterest stoked the fire of her anger.

However, a black curtain had already more than half fallen over her consciousness. Her entire body had gone numb and in a few more seconds, she would no longer be able to speak and would fall unconscious.

Is a woman this powerless? Away from the protection of the soldiers and the people, is the royal family this insignificant?

She remembered that night. Wandering along the mountain path while being afraid of the dark. The Jayce family had saved her from that. She had learned that even though she was royalty, if she took just a single step out of their territory, no, out of the area that she herself knew, she was reduced to this powerlessness.

Although light from the fires should have been illuminating her surroundings, at some point, the sky that stretched out over her head had become incredibly dark. There was not the faintest glimmer of hope in that ink-black sky she gazed up at. As the fear from that time came back to her, she lost the strength to cling to the present.

I am... the royal family is...

Even as her soul was about to be consumed by the night, Vileena asked herself until the very last moment.

The royal family is – yes, it's a "light".

A scene suddenly flashed through Vileena's consciousness. At Zaim Fortress, when she was facing the gallant young general, Ryucown. Vileena herself had said that to the man who's overwhelming grief for his country had driven him to violence.

"The royal family is not the cornerstone of a country. The sense of pride in the retainers and the people is the same – you can find the same light in that nation."

Because of that...

She had wanted to become stronger. She had wanted to become a cornerstone for the royal family. The people and the vassals each had different concepts of happiness but hope was something they could share. The close future was something they could imagine.

It was just after the battle at Zaim had ended – as she could still hear the groans of the injured, the weeping of the Garberan soldiers, and also the ragged breathing of the

masked swordsman Orba who had killed Ryu-crown – that Vileena Owell had thought that she wanted to become a “light” similar to those guiding principles.

That's right, even though I myself am small and powerless...

Vileena exerted the last of her strength. She let out the last of the air in her lungs and, not caring that she might lose consciousness or even her life because of it, she opened her mouth.

“Somebody,” she cried. “Is anybody there? Is there anyone to defeat these scoundrels and protect the noble blood of Garbera’s royal family? Hurry... hurry...”

The only answer was Kiril’s loud laughter. “Splendid. If royalty such as yourself gives the order, will your loyal subjects come running even from the ends of the earth? You truly have a splendid attitude.”

Vileena continued without paying him any attention.

“Is anybody there? Is there no hero to answer Vileena Owell’s voice? If there is someone here – someone that I do not know or cannot see, even someone who is currently fighting against us – who is willing to quickly lift up their sword; I, Princess Vileena, will praise you as a hero!”

Her sight was already virtually covered up. Vileena’s mouth shut and her consciousness was almost gone.

Kiril drew up towards the screaming and crying Layla. Rone’s wife rushed to protect her but he thrust her away with a simple “later.”

He lifted the wet, red blade.

“Somebody...”

Her voice husky, Vileena called out to the end as her eyelids closed.

Kiril continued to laugh loudly. For him, the ‘ceremony’ was reaching its peak and he could feel the highly-concentrated ether against his skin.

He was about to stab his blade with all his strength.

There was a loud neighing sound.

A black wind blew to Vileena's side.

It blew up to Kiril. Just as it was about to collide into him, the figure of a man on horseback was reflected in Vileena's eyes. The astounded Kiril leapt to the side and narrowly avoided the horseman's charge.

"Bastard!" He yelled unintentionally as his opponent was neither a Taúlian soldier nor, obviously, a Mephian one.

He wore an iron mask.

PART 2

It can't be – he had thought but there was no doubt.

It was unmistakably the Garberan princess, Vileena Owell. who lay collapsed, casting a dark shadow on the ground that was illuminated by the fire.

Initially, Orba was going to ride by the village without stopping. Even if Mephian soldiers were running amok, he judged that his first priority was to hurry towards Apta and halt the enemy advance.

But as he was about to leave the village behind, he had run into Zerdians fleeing from it. They were Kiril's subordinates who had been the first to shoot at the search party in an attempt to divide the enemy. Chasing immediately behind them were Taúlian soldiers.

The ones appointed to escort Orba recognised them as comrades and helped them drive away the Zerdians.

"What's going on?" asked the escorts.

"We found the Garberan princess," answered the soldiers from the search party.

While Orba was still doubting his own ears, they rapidly explained the situation. He realised that they had been tricked by the enemy into splitting up. He had no memory of what had happened after that. By the time he noticed it, he was lying low on his horse's neck as it galloped on. Because it was impeding the run, he flung off his hooded cloak.

Every time the horse's hooves drilled holes into the ground's surface, sending earth and sand flying, he got closer to the din from the village and the heat of the fire. And along with that, feelings that were hard to describe were raging darkly through Orba's chest.

And now – Vileena lay collapsed.

It was a relationship that he had once severed.

From the moment he had cast his mortal enemy, Oubary, into the flames, Orba had

decided to abandon his false face. But not only his face. Among the many things that he had thrown aside, there was also the princess from Garbera. Now they had met again in another small village where sparks were flying. Orba's loudly throbbing heart pounded.

Kiril, for his part, had already recovered his stance after the sudden charge. Seeing that his enemy's attention was momentarily turned away from him, he threw the boomerang.

Coming back to himself, Orba instinctively made to cut it down. However, it soared far above the range of his sword. He urged his horse onwards without paying it any further heed. A smile appeared on Kiril's face. As though guided by the enemy, it turned and started to hurtle towards Orba's back. The enemy was drawing close. And the shadow of death chased right behind him.

The hair at the back of Orba's neck stood on end.

A sign.

Back when he had been a gladiator, Orba had often felt that sign of death, and he had learned to trust himself to that instinct. He pulled his foot from the stirrup and leapt at once. And looked beneath him. Humming as it spun, the weapon swept beneath his feet and hit the horse's neck. It cut halfway through the flesh. With a pitiful neigh, the horse lost its balance and pitched forward.

Orba landed on the ground and, with his sword in his right hand, he moved to attack Kiril once again.

Kiril had absolutely not expected him to vault off but, as though he too were compelled by instinct, he dodged out of the way. He did so with a combination of cartwheels and somersaults and twice, thrice, Orba's sword sliced through the air. His acrobatic fighting style was different from any other enemy Orba had ever faced.

While dodging for a fourth time, Kiril attempted a counter-attack with his dagger. Orba nimbly pulled back but, in a complete turn-around, this time it was Kiril's attacks that did not halt. Kicking the ground left and right, he rained down violent blows. It was difficult for Orba to read his rhythm. Just when he was considering attacking downwards from the side to make use of his long reach, Kiril held his elbows tight to his flank and fired off a short stroke like he would an arrow. Moreover, his back was bent or in the middle of a cartwheel, Kiril easily released his blows while in the most

unbelievable positions.

Wildly.

From above, from below, from the right, from the left – his movements were devoid of sense for a swordsman. Nor could Orba seize an opening to counter-attack and he could only dodge the swooping sword.

“Ah!” The tip of the dagger just got in and sliced a vertical tear in Orba’s tunic.

Sensing victory, Kiril’s eyes gleamed white. He made a movement with his right hand and launched himself from the ground with particular strength.

He attacked as he leapt, but Orba was narrowly able to avoid it.

“Unh,” Kiril made a slightly uneasy sound.

The bastard’s gotten used to it – was the sentiment that appeared on his face. While intently dodging his blows, Orba’s body had memorised his opponent’s fighting style or, in other words, his unique rhythm. As proof of that, he was gradually able to push back Kiril’s sword.

A mass of steel sliced through right above Kiril’s head.

“Shit!”

He dodged the next attack by doing a back flip and drew another boomerang from at his waist. Seeing that, Orba tried to cut the distance between them but Kiril broke free and widened it. He raised the weapon high.

“I won’t aim for you,” he grinned broadly. Unconcerned, Orba was about to rush at him sword in hand but – “I’ll slice that woman’s head off.”

Kiril threw the boomerang. Realising the meaning of his words, Orba suddenly came to a stop. He then simultaneously swung his body around while racing in the opposite direction from Kiril.

This time, it was Kiril who chased after Orba.

Vileena’s collapsed figure was reflected in Orba’s trembling line of sight. Turning his

eyes upward, the boomerang had gathered kinetic energy and was hurtling towards her with terrific force.

He wouldn't make it in time.

Kiril's equally terrific strides had him hot on his heels. At almost exactly the same time that Vileena's neck would be sliced through, Orba would also take a blow from behind.

Intuiting as much, Orba immediately drew his sword behind his shoulder.

He hurled it with all his strength.

He had taken a single instant to measure what he was doing by eye, and less than an instant to reach his decision.

The longsword tore through the night air.

Sparks flew on either side. The sound of steel resounded before it pierced the ground. The boomerang veered slightly away from Vileena's head and fell in almost the completely opposite direction from where her body lay.

"So you did it." Orba heard that whisper at his ear.

They were separated by the distance of a single sword stroke. When he turned around, the tip was right before him. As Orba swung himself around, he forced his strong legs to kill the momentum with which he was running. Kiril continued to race fast and the sword he swung was turned aside before his eyes.

Kiril however was also good at shifting his own body weight. Or rather, it looked as though from the outset, he had no such thing as body weight and he immediately doubled back to be in front of Orba.

There was no longsword in Orba's hand.

The gleam of the dagger approached.

Orba bent the upper part of his body. When he was so close to Kiril as to be too close, he extended his hand to his waist. He drew his short sword and in the same movement drove it into Kiril's belly.

“Gaha!”

This time, after the steel sank into his abdomen, it was Orba’s short sword that hummed through the air as it aimed for the swaying enemy who had fallen to his knees.

As the steel was about to slice through his neck, a faint smile seemed to form on Kiril’s lips. Perhaps he felt that even his own death was an offering consecrated to the Dragon Gods.

Orba knew nothing of his enemy’s circumstances.

At that point, the escorting soldiers that Orba had left behind belatedly came rushing up. They seemed to cleave through the confused fight between the soldiers from Mephius and Taúlia.

The Mephian soldiers, who had been dragged into the fray, had from the start no will for fighting. Seeing the numbers for the opposite side increase, they immediately prepared to run and fled from the village.

“Ah, Dear! Open your eyes!”

“Please. Please open your eyes. Open your...”

Now that the fighting had settled down, men and women were everywhere clinging to the fallen corpses. Orba was familiar with those tears and those screams.

He had no intention of getting involved but among the slain there was one man who might still be breathing. He half-forcefully pushed aside the wife and child that were embracing him to take a look at his condition. He was bleeding heavily from his abdomen, so Orba threw off the tunic that Kiril had torn and wound it around him in place of bandages.

Naked from his waist up, he immediately called for the Taúlian soldiers.

“Send a messenger to the nearby relay base. Have them send doctors and medicine by airship.”

He gave orders as though it was completely natural. With no reason to go against him, the soldiers hurriedly sent a horse as they had been told.

“Don’t move him. Have faith in him and wait for help,” Orba said to the woman who seemed to be the daughter.

The woman nodded wordlessly.

That was when –

“Uwoh”

Hearing a voice that was like a lamentation, Orba turned around.

A lone man was standing there. He had bandages wrapped all around his body but it was too fast for him to have been treated for wounds received during this assault. He had severe burns on his face, almost no hair on his head, and one of his eyes was blocked up, so it was difficult to imagine what his original face had been like. The man pointed at Orba with a trembling finger.

“The brand. The brand is burning.”

Orba was naked from the waist up and there was certainly a slave brand etched into his back. While pointing at it, the man’s hideously burned lips flapped open and shut.

“Did you summon these flames too? Uwoh, uwoh, uwoh! It’s burning, it burns all. Those who see that brand will all be cast into the flames!”

He seemed to have lost his sanity. His steps unsteady, he screamed those cryptic words until finally he stumbled to the ground. The woman who appeared to be the daughter of the man Orba had treated hurriedly rushed over to the bandaged man.

The brand?

Orba turned his eyes away from the man and his legs started moving as though he reached a decision.

A crowd of men were currently working to extinguish the fires, and as they angrily shouted out while pulling down buildings and fetching water, the noise was unceasing.

Several Taúlian soldiers had assembled in a corner of the village. They were all crouched in a circle and were calling out to a collapsed figure. That figure – Vileena Owell, was limp. Orba pushed his way through the soldiers and bent down next to the

princess' side.

He placed his hands behind Vileena's neck and back and raised her upper body. As though she had just been lifted out of water, sweat covered the nape of her white, slender neck and her long hair clung to her like seaweed.

At the sight of her lifeless face, Orba's heart pounded furiously. From the time he was born, Orba had never once prayed to anyone, so at this time, he did not know how to alleviate the feelings of dread in his heart. Unthinkingly, he was about to shake her with all his might and loudly shout her name.

But just before he could do so, Vileena's body shuddered in his arms. It was as though she was having a violent coughing fit.

As Orba, panicked, was propping up her back again, he took a long, deep breath that seemed to be wrung from the very bottom of his lungs.

Just as he was wondering if the princess' eyelids were going to quiver incessantly, they started to slightly open.

As though a curtain had lifted, her moist pupils were directly reflecting Orba's face.

Without realising it, Orba made a noise in his throat.

Vileena's parched lips parted.

She whispered something then, as if she had lost all her strength again, her head fell forward to her chest. Quickly bringing his face near to hers, he realised that she was breathing. Apparently, she had lost consciousness.

With another shuddering breath, Orba carried her to where the injured were being gathered to rest.

Looking down at the sleeping girl, who seemed lost in a dream, for some reason he slowly raised his hand and stroked his own face.



There was the touch of iron.

Without a doubt.

He had been wearing the iron mask the entire time.

But even so...

When Vileena had opened her eyes and gazed at Orba, she had looked blank for a moment but had then said –

“So it’s true after all... You’re a liar.”

Then, with a smile, she had immediately fallen asleep again.

Gil Mephius is a liar. He had told her that himself during the last time he had spent with her in Apta. He had spoken that line because he had been feeling guilty towards her, who was starting to trust him and who he was going to have to betray.

But to the very last, that had been as Gil Mephius. It had not been as the masked former gladiator, Orba.

“...”

From the midst of her hazy consciousness, the princess had seen something when she had looked at his mask, no, beyond his mask. For a while, Orba stood still, but he soon remembered that he had very little time left.

“What should we do with the princess?”

While he headed towards the soldiers who were consulting together, he said –

“The princess will stay here.” The startled soldiers turned towards him. “She is uninjured and will soon wake up. At that time, I’d like you to give her a message.”

“W-What?”

“Tell her a welcoming party from Apta will be coming to fetch her immediately.”

“You, what are you saying?”

“You can’t have forgotten what Old Master Ravan told you?”

The soldiers looked at each other repeatedly. Their duty was one thing but this man was absolutely impossible to understand. He had rushed to save the village that they had thought he was going to ignore, the Garberan princess that Taúlia was searching for had been found there, and now he was saying that a welcoming party would be sent from Apta. However, from his every action, they could feel that he was someone who was separate from the common of men, as befitted the hero who had slain Garda.

“Master Ravan seems to have entrusted you with something concerning Mephius.”

“Sorry, but...”

“I get it. You probably can’t talk about it. Hmm, in that case, we’ll go with you. So we will just leave the princess like this?”

“Please.”

He was a man who seemed arrogant yet who adopted a suitable manner when people were being conciliating.

He’s a bit like that much younger cousin of mine – thought the man who had been assigned as the leader of Orba’s escorts. Incidentally, that cousin was fourteen years old.

Although they were already near the border, and there was no longer any need to worry about the mask being seen; Orba, for some reason, deliberately went looking for the hooded cloak that he had discarded and once more wrapped it around himself.

Borrowing a horse from one of the members of the search party, they set off once again. With the black smoke rising from the village at their backs, they hurried on and on. After they had arrived at the border in one trip, Orba and his escorts joined up with the other group which had also recently left Taúlia.

There were a number of men in the cage pulled by dragons. When Orba and the others were spotted coming up to them, the cage was flung open. Under the soldiers’ surveillance, the men were made to line up in a row. None of them were Zerdians and none of their faces were known to Orba.

Among them, there was one man whose face was hidden by a hooded cloak. Exactly

like Orba. The soldiers also seemed awfully mindful of that person and did not high-handedly order him around.

Orba gave that figure a glance and a smile formed under his mask.

As expected of Ravan, he thinks of everything.

But the smile immediately disappeared from his face as they started to follow the Yunos' course.

He did not know who it was who had attacked the village. However, it did not look like they would arrive before Mephius' troops crossed the border.

Orba's mask had started to reflect the pale light of dawn.

PART 3

And thus, dawn had finally started to break.

Compared to the outskirts of Solon, nights in Apta were surprisingly chilly. Only the night's dark shadows were receding, leaving that cool air behind. That morning, the wind was especially clear.

It would have been nice if it had been tomorrow – thought Rogue Saian as he breathed in the scent of the invigorating breeze.

As was typical for the air forces, most of Rogue's men were young. They had not been in Apta for long but he had heard that there were many among them who had immediately started making advances towards the servants in the fort and the town girls, and who were thoroughly enjoying the time before they headed off to the battlefield.

That morning was a fine day for taking a stroll. Rogue was thinking that if the execution had been the next day, they could have leisurely spent this special period with their lovers.

But the time was drawing near. He had no intention of reversing his decision anymore.

At about the same time that the ridgeline of the Belgana Summits was starting to shine white in the west, the former Imperial Guards were lead into the open space. When their figures came into sight, the people gathered around the training grounds all burst into jeers and angry shouts.

"How dare you betray Lord Gil!"

"Ingrates!"

"We'll piss on your corpses!"

Gil had served as lord of Apta. It had only been for a very short period but, because he had accomplished many heroic actions from there, his popularity among the townspeople was high. Compared to the people in the capital, Solon, their feelings of grief were far greater.

Among them however were also those who kept their mouths shut as they watched the former Imperial Guards being tied to the cross-shaped stakes. Because the prince's popularity was high, every piece of gossip associated with Gil was discussed at length in Apta. The story about how his Imperial Guards were mostly former sword slaves who had become the prince's hands and feet, and occasionally his eyes and ears, was easy for the people to empathize with and was widely whispered about in support of him. Therefore, there was a segment of the population that distrusted the tale that the Guards had planned the prince's assassination and who, in part because they were far from Solon, openly gossiped that – "it was definitely all invented so that the emperor could start a war with the west."

And so it was that as a crowd of people looked on, the men were one after another bound to the stakes they were to be crucified on. If they tried to resist even a little, they were hit with swords and pikestaffs.

"Shit!"

"We haven't done anything. Let go!"

On top of not originally being regular enlisted soldiers, they had been accused of a crime they had not committed. They could not be said to be resolutely going out to meet death. There were even some who struggled so violently that it needed several guards to subdue them. It was to the point that it looked like they might be killed before the execution.

Among all that, neither Pashir nor Gouwen had lost their composure.

In Pashir's case, he was thinking that – *So Mephius will have killed me after all, huh?* When he had first made up his mind to at least return a blow to Mephius and fight, at that time, he had already given up on life. Because the strange existence that was Gil Mephius had barged into it, the end of that life had been extended. That was all there was to it.

Gouwen for his part had been the commander of the former Imperial Guards.

Under normal circumstances, he was in a position to give testimony directly to the emperor if he was charged with a crime, but of course, Emperor Guhl Mephius did not wish to know the real situation or rather, he viewed those who knew the details of the affair as a nuisance. Narbal had divined as much and had placed Gouwen's name at the top of the list of those to be executed.

Gowen himself was as calm as Pashir was. He also found some salvation from the fact that his adopted daughter Hou Ran had, for now, escaped execution. Although the fate that awaited her was unlikely to be good – *she's a clever girl. Much trickier than those people who look down on her.*

He felt that since it was Hou Ran, in a few days' time, she would be driving the dragons into the horizon with an unconcerned look on her face and without worrying about herself. Gowen grinned broadly as he was being bound to the crucifixion stake.

Originally, he had not felt any great unhappiness about his life as an overseer of slaves, but at the same time, he did not remember getting any warmth from it either. He sent slaves out to their deaths and expected to simply die in obscurity one day. Then he had gone to work for Orba, who became the crown prince's body double, and had started living with his adopted daughter. Those days had been like a dream. So he no longer had any regrets in this world.

It was only that –

That guy, where is he and what is he doing?

Orba's figure suddenly came to his mind.

And like that, the fifty men were tied to the stakes.

In a moment, the uproarious noise stopped completely. The quality of the air grew different. As though to plug the yawning gap that had opened up within the noise, a row of soldiers carrying guns had appeared in the open space. Commanding them was the adjutant, Gareth. If one went back to the origin, it was he who had suggested executing the Imperial Guards.

As their surroundings fell quiet, and while their steel helmets were bathed in the pale light of the early morning sun, the soldiers each took up their positions.

Fixedly watching the proceedings, Rogue Saian gave a single sigh.

Finally.

When Gareth raised his arm and gave the order to "Fire!", Rogue's men would rush in to stop him. Then Rogue himself would draw the sword from his waist and challenge Nabarl. He would use him as a shield, capture his soldiers, and release the Imperial

Guards. Afterwards, he would wait for the sentence from Solon.

And, just as he had declared to Odyne, until the moment his doom was upon him, he would not allow a single soldier to cross into the west.

His feelings were clear. He had barely eaten or slept during the past three days. Anyway, he would only be woken by nightmares if he lay down. Rogue's family was in Solon. Even if he tried not to think about it, the worst possible scenarios of the treatment the enraged emperor would inflict upon them came to his mind.

He would see scenes of his young wife and childish son becoming silent corpses.

Forgive me – he prayed, closing his eyes.

When he opened them once more, the soldiers had finished lining up. All of them had their guns at the ready. Then, as Rogue was breathing a deep sigh, another person suddenly appeared.

“You...”

Odyne Lorgo. He gave Rogue a sidelong glance and said, “I’m going with you. I have my men lying in wait outside Apta. Even if Nabarl’s subordinates send out messengers, they will be able to buy us time.”

“O-Odyne...”

“General, I am not lightly choosing death. My mind is made up. Let’s wage war on the emperor of Mephius, the two of us, here from Apta. From here, we will call out to our fellow-countrymen and gather comrades.”

“We can’t. Who will gain from it if we revolt now? If I stake my life on...”

“It’s too late. General Saian, I am no one’s slave. I think for myself and decide for myself.”

Rogue and Odyne’s gazes met.

Meanwhile, Gareth stepped in front of the criminals and read the charges out loud. Once he had finished, he withdrew to behind the soldiers. *Is it finally the time?* The people held their breath at that sign.

The sun had risen over the mountain ridgeline and the stakes were casting long, black shadows that bisected the shapes of the people with black.

Gareth's arm rose.

As many guns as there were criminals were lifted onto shoulders.

In the instant that Gareth's mouth opened and he seemed about to order "Fire!" –

A figure suddenly came running.

"General, General!"

Gareth and Nabarl were not the only ones to be astounded, Rogue, who had been about to signal his men, was too.

Something like a burning hope welled up in the old general's chest. However –

"Taúlian soldiers," the guard who had been monitoring the border that was the River Yunos knelt in front of Nabarl. "Taúlian soldiers have been sighted on the other side of the River Yunos!"

When Rogue and the others, Nabarl included, rushed to the top of the cliff that projected westwards, they saw that Taúlian soldiers were indeed lined up side-by-side along the opposite shore. They did not, however, seem to have set up camp. Their attention was drawn to a single airship. It was flying a black-and-white bisected flag.

It denoted a messenger.

"They don't seem to have hidden any guns." Nabarl had borrowed binoculars from the border guards and was peering into the distance. He gave his permission for landing.

Everyone looked tense as the airship swooped down.

And when the man – the messenger from Taúlia – alighted, he said something strange to Nabarl.

“The soldiers who were captured by Taúlia that last time will hereon be returned to your country by boat.”

Rogue could not understand the timing: why now? Nabarl however was nothing but pleased.

“The enemy is afraid of us. They’re definitely doing this in the hope of avoiding all-out war.”

Regardless, they had no reason to refuse.

Once Nabarl gave his permission, a number of small boats were put to water on the opposite shore. On each of them, several men were placed on board. Naturally, Nabarl did suspect that it might be some kind of trap, so he gave the order that the border guards were to fly their airships with their guns trained and ready. After all, the enemy might be trying to divert their attention while they attacked elsewhere.

The first of the boats landed at the bank. One of the soldiers who had gone out to meet it was heard to raise his voice in delight. It seemed that he knew them. Which meant that they were undoubtedly the Mephian war prisoners.

The sun had fully risen by then and the River Yunos was a bright white. Because of the glare from the surface of the water, Rogue narrowed his eyes to see.

As he watched the men clamber onto the bank, then climb up the path carved into the cliff, Rogue’s eyes narrowed for a different reason. Most of the captives were all but naked, but among them there was one person who wore a deep hood that hid their face. Nor was that person obeying the soldiers’ instructions and he was boldly striding forward.

Nabarl thought that he must be someone from his own unit. No doubt he wanted to apologise for the humiliation of having been taken prisoner. Nabarl smiled and was about to greet him, intending to generously clasp him by the shoulders, when –

“What’s the meaning of those stakes?”

“W-What?”

The man wearing a hood jerked his chin towards the line of stakes that was visible even from where they were.

“I’m asking what you intend to do next.”

T-This bastard. Nabarl’s smile had frozen and his eyes were flaring angrily. At any rate, it seemed he was not one of his men. Nor, judging from his manner, was he someone who had been taken captive. Which meant that he must be an envoy from Taúlia. Nabarl did not know if he had accompanied the restoration of the war prisoners intending to establish negotiations, but at any rate his manner of speaking was haughty.

“There is no need for talk. Even with the return of the prisoners, Taúlia’s crime will not disappear.”

“Crime?” amidst the pale morning sun, the man once again looked down towards the line of stakes that seemed oddly detached from reality. “Rogue,” he called out to the old general who stood beside Nabarl. Addressing him without any title of respect. “What do you think?”

He shifted his gaze beneath the hood. In that moment, Rogue Saian’s expression had grown extremely tense.

“What do I think a-about what?”

“Is Taúlia really guilty of such a heinous crime?”

“T-That...”

The soldiers near Nabarl looked doubtfully at Rogue’s flustered state. Thereupon, without waiting for an answer, the man addressed the general who stood on the opposite side of Nabarl from Rogue.

“Odyne.”

Odyne Lorgo in his turn stood straight as though he had been jolted by an electrical current. His eyes were open wide, as though turning the corner of an alleyway, he had suddenly seen the face of someone who should have been dead.

“I’ll ask you too. What is this crime that General Nabarl talks about?”

“That,” Odyne’s voice got caught in his throat. He coughed loudly to clear it. “Taúlia’s crime is that of having assassinated the crown prince.” Perhaps because he was so

agitated, his wording was unusually stiff.

Nabarl sneered in ridicule. “The Taúlian savages don’t seem to know courtesy. You’ve already finished your business. So hurry up and turn tail back to your own land. Although how much longer that land will be yours is...”

“The crown prince’s assassination?” Ignoring Nabarl, the man in the hood spoke without inflection. With a sidelong glance at Nabarl, whose face was going crimson with anger, he looked at Rogue and Odyne in turn. “Then I’ll ask you one other thing. Do you believe that? That Taúlia really did assassinate Crown Prince Gil?”

“I... no, we...” Odyne started to answer but then stopped.

It was Rogue who carried on. “We did not witness the actual scene. From start to finish, it was His Imperial Majesty who investigated the situation, and who concluded that this was the case. What could we do but abide by his words? It was the same for everyone here, from the generals to the soldiers.”

It was at about that time that the soldiers who were gathered on the bank held their breath and started to watch what was going on.

“Indeed,” Odyne started speaking a second time, “Once, a certain person told me something. ‘Are you a slave who only lives according to somebody’s orders,’ he asked me. Even though it felt like he was slicing through my chest, national affairs are not so simple. Within Mephius, only the imperial family has the authority to decide things and to move the country.”

“...”

“They which they can see through is the whole world to us; and it is only their plans that have the authority to move the country, or in other words, to move us ordinary people. Both that world and that authority are essentially Mephius’ future. If we forcibly bring about a future other than the one His Majesty the Emperor has decided on, simply on the pretext that we dislike obeying this or that order, the politics of Mephius will end in failure. The dominion will be split in two or three, and even the peaceful life that the people are barely able to hold on to will disappear in flames.”

What are they on about? Nabarl’s shoulders shook incessantly as he grew more and more irritated.

He needed to end this farce quickly and get back to the execution. Nabarl intended to send messengers to appeal directly to the emperor immediately afterwards. They would once more strike at Taúlia with their military might. Now, when the opponent was showing weakness by returning the captives, should be a good opportunity.

Bah – there was no need to lend an ear any further. He was on the verge of raising his voice to send the Taúlian messenger away. And as he was doing so, that messenger said something that he could not let pass.

“So then. What if the future that the imperial family sees is misguided?”

“What!”

“What if the imperial family tried to force its authority down a path that was clearly wrong? Would you still obey like dogs? If you knew that Mephius would perish and its people would be cast to the flames, would you still slavishly work to implement that future?”

“Y-You bastard,” Nabarl was almost lightheaded from rage. “Somebody seize this fool! Tie him to a stake. Let the Taúlian savages on the other shore watch his execution!”

Rogue calmly held out an arm to stop the soldiers who suddenly started to spring into action. Then he spoke –

“At that time,” his voice was hoarse, “we would fight. If the future seen by old eyes is mistaken, we would usher in young eyes to view a new future.”

“Same,” Odyne nodded. “However, we are but small people. It is as I said earlier. We do not have the clairvoyance to see the distant future. It is the same regarding judging whether or not the future that His Majesty the Emperor sees is mistaken.”

“The emperor is mistaken.” The man said clearly.

It felt as though a soundless commotion was blowing like the wind across the entire area.

The sky was dimly blue, the clouds were light and low.

Nabarl had already passed beyond anger and was utterly dumbfounded. Next to him, Rogue asked –

“Why do you think so? How can you say that so surely? Do you have a tangible reason to say that His Majesty is currently mistaken? And can you prove it to us?”

“That –”

“Eei, enough, enough!” Nabarl shouted out as his emotions finally crossed the line. “Just how far is this stupidity going to go? If no one else will do it, I will. I will destroy with my own hands the fool who claims that our illustrious Majesty’s words are mistaken.”

His hand went to the sword at his waist that he was about to draw in a single movement.

For a moment, it seemed to those watching that a terrifically strong wind blew –

In actual fact, the wind remained calm. However, everyone there had the illusion that the swords swung by Rogue and Odyne, that were now crossed in front of Nabarl, had summoned the wind from either side and that at the same time, that wind had swept back the man’s hood.

“T-This...” Nabarl’s eyeballs seemed to start out of their sockets as he suddenly found himself with two blades pressed at his throat. “What kind of behaviour is this? I’ve been thinking for a while that you were babbling nothing but nonsense, but did you bastards also cross over to Taúlia? So, you’re traitors to the imperial family and enemies of Mephius!”

“Take a good look, General Nabarl,” Rogue’s expression was that of someone who was swallowing down irrepressible emotions with a grim determination.

“What?”

“Take a close look with your own eyes at who you were about to point a sword at.”

Nabarl removed his gaze from the swords and turned it instead towards the man standing before him. The glimmering River Yunos shot countless darts of light into his eyes. Bordered by that gleam, the man’s face at first appeared as a dark shadow that he could not clearly make out.

When Nabarl’s eyes finally grew accustomed to the reflected light, his voice burst out in a shout –

“Ah!”

His sword fell to the ground with a loud clang.

“P-Prince...”

A name left his trembling lips.

“Crown Prince... Gil Mephius!”

That was the moment in which the crown prince, who was supposed to have lost his life in Apta, returned once more to life in Apta –

The moment in which Gil Mephius returned to the front stage of History.

AFTERWORD

With this, Rakuin no Monshou has reached eight volumes.

When he finished writing the first novel in the series, the author himself tilted his head and thought “This! ...How will it do (sales-wise)?” yet before I noticed it, we’re on the eighth volume.

I’m amazed.

At the same time, I can only feel grateful to my respected editor, who tirelessly puts in great effort to make this work even somewhat decent, to “3”, who gives depth to the novel’s world, and of course to all you readers who continue to support the work by buying it.

Please continue to stick with Orba’s heroic tales a little while longer.

Well then.

Various things occurred between the previous volume and the release of this novel.

To tell you the truth, I’m revising this afterword three months after I had first finished writing it.

A shock struck the whole of Japan^[4]. My family and I did not suffer any harm but every time I learned of the situation in the disaster area through the news, I felt as though my chest was being constricted. To those of you who did suffer harm, I offer my heartfelt concern.

Although it isn’t real, I can’t help but wish that this tale, which hopefully follows a realistic narrative, might help soothe your hearts.

If you can empathize with the characters, rejoice with them, get angry and sad with them, excitedly wait for the next development... these escapes from reality can never

be a bad thing. Because I believe that if one can hold in one's heart another (or more) world(s) that differ from reality, that can become a "power" than can change that self-same reality.

That, at least for the time it took to read this novel, your hearts were able to take pleasure in another world, that you forgot your sorrows even if only for an hour, and that it was able to give you a renewed energy,

– I can only pray for that.

-- Tomonori Sugihara

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The author uses the made-up word ikusabito (戦人) which reads as "war/battle person".
2. The kanji used are those for 'hundred-year dynasty' (百年王朝) while the furigana read 'millennium' (ミレニアム). I'm assuming that the use of 'millennium' is there to indicate that this was a utopian Golden Era, rather than being some weird mistake in numbers.
3. This is most likely the Japanese variant of crucifixion in which criminals were tied to crosses then killed with spears (replaced here by guns). This method of execution was not generally a form of prolonged torture, unlike the Roman tradition involving nails, flaying and leaving the condemned to die.
4. This novel was first released in the month following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of March 2011.



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